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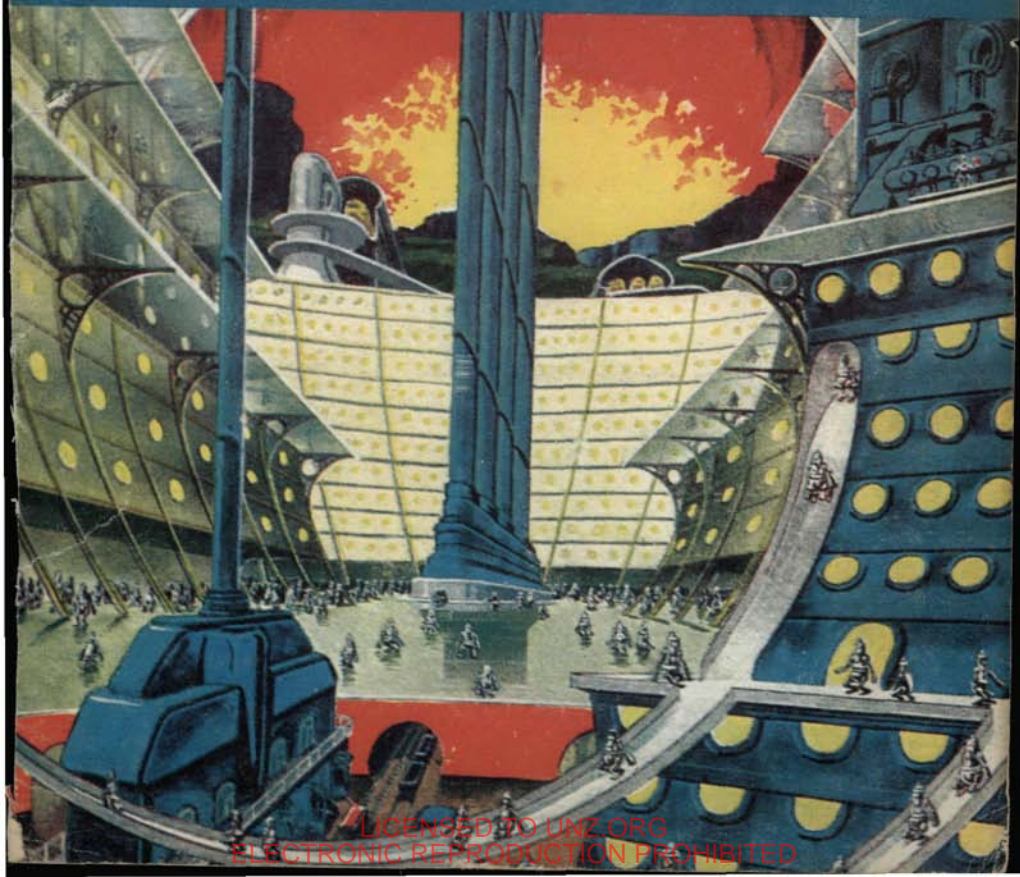
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AMAZING STORIES, Vol. 41, No. 3, August, 1967, is published bi-monthly by Ultimate Publishing Co., Inc., 69-62 230 Street, Oakland Gardens, Flushing, N.Y. 11364. Editorial office: Box 7, Oakland Gardens, Flushing, N.Y. 11364. Business office: Purchase, N.Y., Box 175, Portchester, N.Y. at 50¢ a copy. Subscription rates: One year (6 issues) United States and possessions: \$2.50; Canada and Pan American Union countries: \$3.00; all other countries: \$3.50. Change of address notices, undeliverable copies, orders for subscriptions, and other mail items are to be sent to Box 7, Oakland Gardens, Flushing, N.Y. 11364. Second Class Postage paid at Flushing, N.Y. and at additional mailing office. Copyright 1967 by Ultimate Publishing Co., Inc. All rights reserved. Editorial contributions must be accompanied by return postage and will be handled with reasonable care; however, publisher assumes no responsibility for return or safety of art work, photographs or manuscripts.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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# THE FUTURE IN BOOKS

by Harry Harrison



SF appears to be the last bastion of the short story. Allen Ginsberg, Kerouac and company are spiraling off happily in their own direction, and good luck to them, but I like to feel that there is more to the short story than that. O'Hara writes his stories, Albee, Styron and Barth theirs, and the best of American luck to them as well. The fact still remains that the only regularized markets for short stories with any popular appeal are the science fiction magazines. If anyone doubts that I have the proof before me—a number of books made up of stories from these magazines. Read any anthologies of confession stories lately—or picked up a collection of short stories by your favorite western writer? SF is the only field where books of short stories consistently make money.

It must be more than chance that brings three authors' collections to hand at one time. Pride of place must go to WHO CAN REPLACE A MAN? by Brian W. Aldiss (Harcourt, Brace & World, \$4.50) which was published in Great Britain under the more appropriate title of THE BEST SCIENCE FICTION STORIES OF BRIAN W. ALDISS. These are the author's choice of his best stories to date, and an impressive collection they are too. I am going to resist the temptation to dwell upon and analyze individual stories—though it cannot be denied that POOR LITTLE WARRIOR! reads just as well the tenth time as it did the first—because that is not the way these works should be treated. You would not take a collection of Kipling's stories and go through it saying I like this one, this one didn't come



off, etc. You cannot do this with Aldiss either, for the same reasons. These stories do not come apart when you examine them. And they are of major importance. They demonstrate the flexibility and possibilities of the SF medium and this volume might very well be used as a text in a course on how to write the science fiction story.

What Aldiss does, better than anyone else around today, is to put the fantasy of fiction on human terms, to establish the fleshy reality of his people. You, the reader, are there with them. These stories are visions of things never experienced in this world, or even imagined, yet here they come to life. At times he gives concrete reality to our nightmares, supplies them with the body and terror of reality, for in an Aldiss story everything is real. If, at times, it is a dirty, sweaty and scratchy world, where people eructate after a meal, than I ask you—what is our world like? Each story in this book is enjoyable for a different reason and I recommend it without reservations of any kind.

The worst thing about *NINE BY LAUMER* by Keith Laumer (Doubleday, \$3.95) is the overly long and pretentious introduction by Harlan Ellison. If this is skipped and the stories are allowed to stand by themselves, they stand quite well. The most typical, of

what we might consider a Laumer story, is *DINOCHROME*, and very successful it is too, even though written in the difficult, first person monolog of an intelligent machine. The gadgetry and technical terms of SF sparkle and whirl brilliantly, producing a story that is a pleasure to read. Just as successful, in a totally different way, is *THE WALLS*, a sensitive examination of the effects of environmental pressures upon a disintegrating personality. Laumer was obviously a pulp magazine reader in the thirties—as were we all—and still bears some of the scars of this. A multi-layered story like *A TRIP TO THE CITY* is marred by the unnecessary shoot-em-up violence at the end. If this author has a fault it is that his guns go off too easily and, while this makes for story pace and the fans love it, for his own sake he might find other ways to move and climax his works.

On the other hand, Mr. Brunner can be too diffidently British, *OUT OF MY MIND* by John Brunner (Ballantine, 60¢) and at times one pines for a karate chop to the neck or the thunderous roar of the hand blaster. When Brunner pulls it off, as in *SUCH STUFF*, his understatement can be quite impressive. Here a very small idea, a man who cannot be made to suffer from dream deprivation, is made to carry—and it bears

(Continued on page 155)

THE FUTURE IN BOOKS

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*Although it's a little early for predictions—we're writing this on the first day of spring—it's beginning to look very much as if 1967 will be Jack Vance year. What with his "Last Castle" recently taking a Nebula — as Best Novella for 1966—and his beginning not one but two new series: the "Narrow Land" stories currently running in Fantastic (see the July issue) and now the subtly ironic "Man from Zodiac" episodes, in the first of which the soft spoken but quick-witted agent from Earth must somehow make peace between two hostile peoples who'd like nothing better than to cut each other's throat!*

# THE MAN FROM ZODIAC BY JACK VANCE

Illustrated by GRAY MORROW

## Chapter I

UPON the death of Rudolf Zar-  
ius, his nephew Edgar Zarius  
and his granddaughter Lusiane  
Ludlow each inherited forty-six  
percent of Zodiac Control, Incor-  
porated.

Milton Hack, Zodiac's field rep-  
resentative, owned the remaining  
eight percent of the company.

A week after the funeral, Edgar  
and Lusiane met in the Zodiac  
offices at Farallon, fifteen miles  
out in the Pacific from San Fran-

cisco. Neither held the other in  
large esteem. Lusiane was a  
young woman of striking appear-  
ance and extravagant tastes, Ed-  
gar a tall pale man with a long  
nose and narrowly spaced eyes.  
Lusiane was self-willed, pam-  
pered and vain; Edgar's luxuries  
were small, fastidious and pri-  
vate. He thought her frivolous;  
she thought him a bore.

The conference was cautious  
and constrained. In a careful  
voice Edgar announced that he  
was willing to consider the pur-

chase of Lusiane's shares. Lusiane gave a casual assent and named a price which aroused Edgar's amazement. "You must be crazy," he said coldly. "The business hasn't made that much money during its entire existence."

Lusiane glanced around the office, disdainful of the shabby furniture, outmoded irsys\*, dusty mementos and testimonials. "Small wonder. The place is a stable. Obviously changes must be made. I suggest first of all that you fire Hack."

"I fire him?" Edgar raised his eyebrows. "You fire him. You own as much stock as I do."

Lusiane showed her beautiful teeth in a mocking laugh. Milton Hack, with his eight percent interest, represented the balance of power, and neither wished to antagonize him.

"Naturally you tried to buy him out?" said Lusiane.

Edgar gave a curt nod, a sour grin. "No doubt you did the same?"

"I did. What a perverse man!" Lusiane spoke with unusual heat. She had used all her persuasions and urgencies upon Hack without visible effect. "Do we need a 'field representative'? His duties are so indefinite. Why don't we put him to selling or supervising or something of the sort?"

Edgar shrugged. "Why not?"

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\*Information retrieval system.

THE MAN FROM ZODIAC



Hack was sent out to solicit new business among the planets of the Andromeda chain: a task for which he had no great aptitude. Four months later he returned to Farallon with nothing to show for his efforts but expense vouchers.

Changes had occurred in his absence, going far beyond the face-lifting he had expected. The old offices had been enlarged and re-decorated in spectacular style. The lobby was now circular, with black walls leaning in to form a dome at some obscure height. Around the periphery ran a black leather couch; the walls displayed a series of holograms, each the image of one of the settled worlds. Stainless steel strips in the black floor converged upon a circular reception desk of grey fiboroid, and here, under a glittering chandelier, sat a rather small girl in a uniform of black and white diaper. Her hair was a smooth dark cap; her face was intelligent, inquiring, devoid of cosmetics, and Hack wondered who had hired her: Edgar or Lusiane.

Hack was forced to admit that the change was for the better, insofar as it affected the corporate image. The alterations of course had cost a great deal of money, eight percent of which derived from himself, and Hack gave a wince of annoyance. He approached the receptionist.

"Mr. Zarius, please."

She searched his face, which was square from forehead to cheekbone, thin at the chin, with a precise drooping mouth, a thin crooked nose. Hack was not a large man; relaxing he seemed mild, a trifle pedantic, almost inconsequential. "Yes sir. You are . . . ?"

"Milton Hack."

"Sorry, Mr. Hack, I didn't recognize you. Will you wait a few minutes? Mr. Zarius is busy with clients."

Hack strolled around the room, inspecting the holograms: perfect windows into space. The worlds depicted hung at distances of perhaps ten thousand miles, rotating with ponderous globularity. Hack had visited a number of these worlds: indeed, there was Ethelrinda Cordas, from which he had just returned. Hack went close to the hologram, traced the course of his travels. Wylandia to Heyring to Torre, back to Wylandia; across to the east coast and Colmar, north to Roseland and Seprissa; inland to Parnassus and the palace of Cyril Dibden the Benefactor, then to the island Gentila Mercado, just below the Pirates Peninsula . . . . A planet of paradoxical contrasts, thought Hack: savage and soft, harsh and easy . . . . The orifice into the inner office expanded; three men of Ethelrinda Cordas stepped forth. Hack



stared in astonishment. Fantasies? Imaginary constructions? Unfortunately not. They were unmistakable: massive coarse-featured men, indifferent equally to Earth styles and norms of conduct. Their black hair was plaited into twenty-four shoulder-length strands, each caught into a golden fob. They wore varnished black jackets with loose sleeves, loose black- and brown-striped breeches, white boots with mother-of-pearl buckles. Despite the flamboyant costumes, they were most notable for their remarkable noses: enormous members inlaid with gems and liver-stone, the patterns splaying out across their cheeks. They stalked past Hack without so much as a glance, ornaments jangling, trailing a reek compounded of many qualities.

The receptionist wrinkled her nose. "What ruffians."

"You should see their wives," said Hack. He went on into the inner office, which like the lobby seemed calculated more for spectacle than efficiency. Edgar Zarius, tall, morose and saturnine, was an incongruous sight behind the ormolu and black marble desk. "Ah, Hack," said Edgar in a colorless voice. "You're back then. Sit down."

Hack settled into a leather and oak chair of ancient Iberian derivation. "There seem to be changes about the office."

"Miss Ludlow decided the place needed a face-lift," said Edgar in a careful voice which suggested that neither Hack's criticism nor his approval would be considered appropriate. "Ruinously expensive of course. I hope you had a good trip?"

"Very pleasant, thank you."

"Good. Let's look over your contracts."

"I don't have any."

Edgar raised his eyebrows. "No contracts? No new business?"

"Sorry."

"I'm very much disappointed." Edgar leaned back in his chair. "Disappointed indeed... Hmm." He focused his eyes an inch above Hack's head. "Please don't take what I have to say personally. In essence, all of us must do better! This is the symbolic significance of our new premises: new vigor, new dedication, a new Zodiac!"

Hack made no comment.

"We have been complacent, over-conservative," Edgar went on. "This is a competitive business! We've been losing contracts right and left—to Aetna, to Fidelity, even to Argus!" He glanced sharply at Hack. "In some cases through sheer aimlessness and lassitude!"

"Evaluating a contract," said Hack politely, "is a matter of experience. Aetna and Fidelity concentrate on low-yield low-risk contracts. We could pick up a doz-

en if we had the crews. Argus is almost bankrupt. Right now they'll snatch anything in sight."

Edgar spoke in a cold voice. "Argus is an aggressive concern—more so, I fear, than ourselves. I certainly don't counsel recklessness; I do insist however on alertness and enterprise."

Hack had nothing to add to his previous remarks.

After a brief pause Edgar continued in a voice even more ponderous than before: "To be specific, you have just returned from Ethelrinda Cordas."

"Quite correct."

"What were your activities there?"

Hack reached to the desk, tapped irsys buttons. A Mercator projection of Ethelrinda Cordas appeared on the wall: the single vast continent, two large islands, a spatter of smaller islands. Hack indicated the westernmost of the large islands. "This is Agostino Cordas. Merit Systems has the contract." He pointed to the other. "Juanita Cordas, populated by a few ranchers. Nothing for us here. The big continent is Robal Cordas, mostly wilderness. On the west coast is the Cordas Federation: five cities, some towns; an agricultural economy, with some light manufacturing. They have a fifty-year contract with Mutual Benefit, tight as a drum. At Wylandia I chartered an air-car and flew east,

across the wilderness." He pointed to the interior of the continent. "Jungle, desert, lava-flows, mountains—uninhabited except for beasts. Here on the east coast—" Hack tapped the complicated shoreline "—the situation is different again. Isolated communities, some of them primitive, some predatory. Colmar, Roseland, Seprissa—I checked them all. Parnassus, with a population of two million, is a potential customer, but Cyril Dibden has his own ideas. The Pirate Peninsula is directly to the east; Cyril Dibden is kept on tenterhooks anticipating raids and forays—the only fly in his ointment. He gave me the run of the place for three days, but wouldn't even discuss a contract."

"Interesting," said Edgar, darting a quick sidewise glance at Hack. "And what else?"

"Not very much. Dibden insisted that I visit Gentila Mercado, a trading depot south of Parnassus. I talked to a group from Sabo on the Pirates Peninsula. They wanted to give us a contract but I turned them down."

Edgar sat up in his seat. "A contract subsequently awarded to Argus Systems."

Here, thought Hack, was the matter toward which Edgar, with his talk of alertness and enterprise, had been bearing.

Edgar asked in his driest voice: "May I inquire your reasons for

rejecting this specific contract?"

"It looked like a poor bet. Much grief and no cooperation."

"Their money is good," Edgar pointed out. "So long as we perform our contractual obligations we don't care whether they cooperate or not."

"They're a bloodthirsty lot," said Hack, "and devious to boot. It makes a poor combination."

"You miss the point," said Edgar, carefully patient, as if explaining a difficult paradox to a child. "Our function is to provide certain services, for which we receive recompense. We are not philosophers or moralists. We make no judgments. We perform the services for anyone who pays for them. Do you feel that the people of Sabo—the Sabols, I believe they call themselves—would refuse to pay our fees?"

"Hard to say. They have money enough. They don't seem niggardly."

"This is my own conclusion," said Edgar. "Did you happen to observe the three persons who left my office just previous to your arrival?"

"I saw them, yes. The receptionist described them as clients."

"They are Phrones from Ethelrinda Cordas. Phronus, I believe, is a community adjacent to Sabo."

"You signed a contract?"

"I did." Edgar struck his fist on the desk. "Compete! compete! compete! We can't let up an in-

stant! Argus snatched the Sabo contract out from under our noses. They made fools of us!" He slid a document across the desk. "The Phronus contract. I wish all were this good. We provide skills and services; they pay costs and salaries plus ten percent. On these terms I'd take a contract on the south end of hell."

Hack examined the contract. It read:

AGREEMENT AND COVENANT  
BETWEEN  
THE STATE OF PHRONUS AND  
ZODIAC CONTROL  
INCORPORATED

*Paragraph 1: Statement of purpose and scope of covenant: All persons be advised that this instrument constitutes a firm and binding covenant between the people of that political entity known as Phronus, situated on the eastern coast of the continent known as Robal Cordas, on the planet known as Ethelrinda Cordas, otherwise described as the sixth planet of that star identified in the Standard Astronomical Almanac as Andromeda 469: these people hereinafter referred to as 'Entity First'; and the Zodiac Control Corporation, situated at Farallon, on the west coast of North America, Earth, hereinafter referred to as 'Entity Second'.*

For that consideration defined in Paragraph 3, Entity Second engages to provide Entity First an administrative organization, consisting of expert personnel, with their essential and necessary tools and equipment, and only these, for the purpose of providing Entity First a judicious, efficient, expert and economical management of its public functions, as defined but not limited by Paragraph 2, to the extent and in the degree stipulated by Entity First.

*Paragraph 2: Specific provisions of the contract.* The categories of services Entity Second agrees to provide Entity First, to the extent and degree Entity First deems necessary, are as follows:

1. Child and adult education, in all useful and advantageous phases of contemporary knowledge, as further defined in Schedule A of the appendix to this document.
2. Export and import brokerage, including purchasing and delivering to the State of Phronus at the city Grangali or elsewhere, at the option of Entity First, any and all commodities, tools, supplies, or other devices necessary to the implementation of this contract, of high quality, at the lowest prices available to Entity Second; and also including sale of such

commodities produced by Entity First at the most advantageous prices, and expeditious delivery of these commodities to the purchaser thereof.

3. Enforcement of such laws and promulgation of such customs deemed proper and desirable by Entity First, in accordance with the so-called 'Traditional Mores and Punitive Methods of Phronus', including maintenance of public and private order, and protection of public and private property.
4. Protection of territorial integrity, including vigorous prosecution of attack upon and defense against enemies of the state of Phronus, such enemies defined as those who are self-avowed, or those so identified by Entity First, including provision of all necessary equipment and trained personnel.
5. Sanitation, disease prevention, the promulgation of health and longevity, as defined and limited by Schedule B in the appendix to this document.
6. Fire prevention and control, together with the provision of efficacious fire-control equipment and personnel trained in its use, as defined and limited in Schedule C of the appendix to this document.



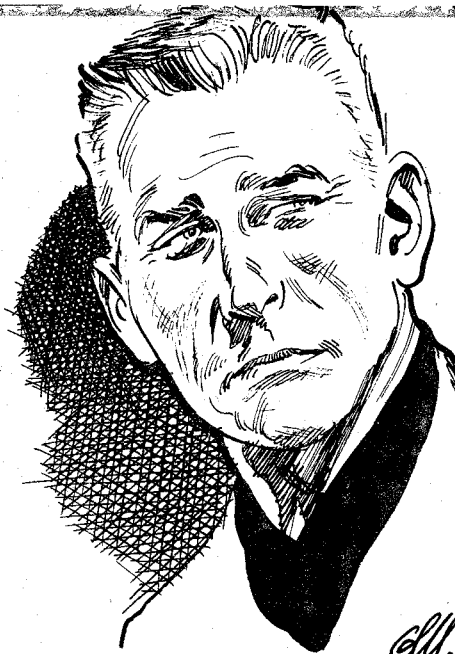
7. The installation and operation of suitable systems of communication, transportation, water supply, sewage disposal, control of air and water pollution, conservation of scenic beauty, development of natural resources, energy generation and transfer, and any such related amenities or services as Entity First may deem advantageous and useful.
8. All and any other similar and related services which Entity First may require through the duration of this contract.

*Paragraph 3: Reimbursements and payments.*

Entity First will compensate Entity Second for services performed under provisions of Paragraphs One and Two in money or such other valuable commodity or medium of exchange satisfactory to both parties, according to the following schedule:

Entity First shall promptly reimburse to Entity Second all funds spent on the behalf of Entity First in prosecution of all services desired and authorized by Entity First.

Entity First will make available to Entity Second funds sufficient to pay all salaries and discharge all indebtedness incurred in prosecution of services



as is specified in Paragraph 2.

Entity Second shall provide trained personnel of the highest professional quality to implement, conduct and manage the contractual duties of Entity Second as specified in Paragraph 2, but Entity First, at its option, may substitute for any member of such personnel an individual or individuals specified by itself, provided that this individual is competent to perform the duties normal to the position he is required to fill.

In addition to salaries and all costs of materials, supplies, ma-

chinery, royalties, drugs, mechanisms, circuitry, printed material, plans, information tabs, and any other expenses incurred by Entity Second in prosecution of the above-stated functions, Entity First agrees to pay to Entity Second a further fee of ten percent (10%) of the total expenditures required to implement the programs defined in Paragraph 2 on the final day of each month (Ethelrinda Cordas chronometry).

*Paragraph 4:*

The duration of this contract shall be seven years (Ethelrinda Cordas chronometry) after the instant of signing, Entity First retaining option to renew the contract on identical terms for a second period of seven years. It is further agreed that by, and only by, mutual consent of Entities First and Second may this contract be voided before term of completion.

*Paragraph 5: Bond of performance.*

Entity Second guarantees faithful and efficient performance of the terms of this contract and will furnish bond of performance in the sum of one million dollars, deposited to a joint account at that office of Barclay's Bank located at the city Wylandia on the planet Ethelrinda Cordas; or

will insure itself to such performance in the same amount with any recognized and reputable bonding agency mutually acceptable to Entities First and Second.

*Signatures:*

For Entity First: (here an untidy blotch of undecipherable characters).

For Entity Second: Edgar Zarius, President, Zodiac Control

*Witnesses:* (further signatures and further blotches).

Hack turned the page, scrutinized the appendix with its set of schedules, then placed the document on the desk. "Who composed the contract?"

"Someone from their side. It seems a reasonable, straightforward contract and guarantees us an excellent profit. Salaries are at our discretion, and there will be no difficulty recruiting an able team."

"You are acquainted with Ethelrinda Cordas, specifically the east coast of Robal Cordas?" inquired Hack delicately.

"No indeed. This is where you enter the picture. As a promotional representative—to be blunt—you have not done as well as could be expected. However, having just returned from Ethelrinda Cordas, you are familiar with local conditions. I have decided

to place you in charge of the Phronus project." Edgar scanned Hack's face, but Hack betrayed no emotion.

"You will return to Ethelrinda Cordas, confer with responsible Phrone officials, prepare a phase program, set up a preliminary financial plan. It is of the utmost importance that an operational fund be collected, to avoid using company funds. See to this immediately."

"If feasible," said Hack.

Edgar gave him a blank stare. "Why should it not be feasible?"

"The contract calls for no such prepayment. There is no provision for a reserve fund."

"You must get around the difficulty as best you can, if the difficulty in fact exists."

"I'll do my poor best," said Hack. "Meanwhile I require a drawing account of, say, twenty thousand dollars—if only to make sure my own salary and expenses are paid."

Edgar frowned at his fingertips. "This seems a rather unreasonable sum. The reserve fund I mentioned, which you will collect from our clients, should suffice."

"Hopefully. Still, the contract does not specifically define the word 'prompt' in the phrase 'prompt reimbursement'. When my personal interests are concerned I prefer to be specific."

Edgar was not pleased, but Hack refused to yield. Caustic remarks

were exchanged, and Hack wondered aloud whether Lusiane Ludlow might still be interested in buying his holdings, thus increasing her share of the company to fifty-four percent. Edgar hissed between his teeth, threw up his hands and issued the necessary voucher.

He gave Hack his final instructions. "The Phrones are a wholehearted, whole-souled people, possibly somewhat vehement. You will necessarily enforce public order and compliance with our rules tactfully. In no case do we want dissatisfied or resentful clients; this is the worst possible advertisement for Zodiac."

"I hope they use the same tact with me," said Hack.

Edgar's response was a dour grunt.

## Chapter II

Hack took leave of Earth almost as soon as he had arrived, riding the Black Line packet to Alpheratz, thence by Andromeda Line to Mu Andromedae, thence by Algin-Obus Interworld Transport outward in the direction of the Great Nebula to the F6 star Martin Cordas, Andromeda 469 and its seventh planet Lucia Cordas; thence by Cordas transfer to Ethelrinda Cordas and the west coast city Wylandia.

Hack spent three days at Wylandia, a pleasant semi-tropical

city built out on piles and stilts into San Remo Bay, with the shoreward section dwarfed under a grove of enormous trees, some of the structures being attached to the trunks and rising behind and above the rest of the city in an irregular terrace. Hack opened a company account at the local branch of Barclay's Bank and another in his own name, into which he paid the sum advanced him by Edgar Zarious. The Marlene Hildenbrand Hotel was an eccentric structure of many wings, balconies and promenades at the end of a twisting pier, overlooking the canals and water avenues of Wylandia on one hand, San Remo Bay on the other. The cuisine and service, if quaint, were more than satisfactory, and Hack, contrasting the cool verandah, the wicker chairs and potted plants, with the east coast of Robal Cordas was in no hurry to depart; and indeed he protracted his stay a day longer than was strictly necessary on the pretext of renewing items of his equipment, repacking his luggage, buying local information tabs for his portable irsys.

Finally, with no further excuse for delay, he chartered an air-car, loaded aboard his luggage, and was flown eastward across the central wilderness.

Now Hack encountered a new annoyance. The charterer, upon reflection, refused to take Hack

directly to Grangali, the central city of Phronus. Hack argued, urged, threatened; the charterer only smiled placidly and swinging somewhat to the south put down at Seprissa, where he discharged Hack and his luggage.

Seprissa, a city of twenty or thirty thousand folk, was the commercial node of a vast hinterland and derived its existence from the growing, packing and export of exotic fruits. Hack learned that the city's only air-cab was in service, hired, so he was informed, by another Earthman for conveyance to Sabo: evidently the representative of Argus Control. In any event, the time was late afternoon, and Hack had no wish to arrive at Grangali after dark. He crossed the central plaza—Seprissa's single concession to a civic identity—and secured lodging at the inn.

His dinner was served under an arbor with three sides open to the plaza. Children, observing his strange clothes, came to stand around him and make quiet comments in their lilting version of Old English. Seprissa was the center of their universe, thought Hack, with Earth the planet remote and bizarre.

He was served fruit, a stew of something like clams in a dark-red sauce, garnished with nuts and a sour vegetable, seed-cake, pale yellow beer, all of which he ate without inquiry or specula-



tion. A squeamish man often went hungry on the outworlds.

Dusk came to the plaza. The young folk of Seprissa came out to promenade. Three moons hung in the sky: one tinted a peculiar pale blue, the second large and yellow as an autumn apple, the third a far golden sequin. Hack sat sipping tea and presently entered into conversation with a man at the next table, the proprietor of a fishing boat. The creatures of all the Cordas seas were inedible, Hack learned, but valuable nonetheless by reason of their by-products, most notably the beautiful liver-stone of the jewel-fish. "Profitable, but a risky business," remarked the fisherman. "I never know when I put out whether I'll be dead or alive by nightfall." He jerked his thumb to the north. "Cutthroats, bandits—they are always to be feared."

"Whom are you speaking of?" inquired Hack.

"The Phrones, the Sabols—who else? When they can't maraud each other they make do with innocent folk elsewhere. See there." He pointed across the plaza to a low flat stone building. "Our armoury. We're not warriors, but when they become too bold we give back as good as we get." He presently took his leave, and Hack sat another hour under the three moons.

In the morning he went to the

headquarters of the air-cab, but once again was refused transport directly to Grangali. "If I put my cab down, they'd never let it rise," said the pilot. "Yesterday I had a fare for Peraz, in Sabo—an Earthman like yourself, talking about government for the Sabols. Bah. Like shoes for fish . . . . What's your business at Grangali? If you're selling, they'll plunder your samples and fling you into the sea."

"I'm bringing government to the Phrones," said Hack.

"Another?" exclaimed the pilot. "So soon on the other's heels? A pair of hopeful men. I'll do for you what I did for him—drop you off in Parnassus, then you can cross Cyril Dibden's sting-field and take your own chances."

With this Hack was forced to be content. Clearly, if he wanted to operate efficiently, he would need an air-car of his own. He loaded his luggage aboard the cab; they rose into the limpid air of Ethelrinda Cordas, so different from Earth's ancient and well-used murk, and flew north across the coastal plains. To the west rose the Hartzac Massif: peaks of granite, frosted with ice, and beyond twelve thousand miles of wilderness.

The coast retreated sharply, the ocean spread west, thrusting fingers deep into the Hartzacs, receiving a counter-thrust from Pirates Peninsula. Beyond was Par-

nassus, Cyril Dibden's private Utopia, where two million cosmologists, psychodeles, mathematicians and mentors worked at the creation of a universal metaphysics.

It became necessary to fly across the southwestern limb of Phronus, which extended to the Hartzacs, cutting off Parnassus from the sea. The pilot kept a nervous watch below. "The Phrones have few weapons, thanks to the Contraband Patrol. Still they have a gun or two and like nothing better than shooting down aircraft. Dibden, crafty man, so far has held them at bay."

A few moments later they crossed a great swath cut through the forest. "That's the boundary; we're over Parnassus now." And the pilot, going to his radio, called down for landing clearance. He was answered by Dibden himself, who gave the necessary permission.

Ten minutes later the cab alighted in front of a long low marble mansion, chastely beautiful after some nameless style of the classic past. Hack alighted with his luggage, discharged the aircab, and turning, found Cyril Dibden himself waiting to receive him.

Dibden was somewhat puzzled. "Mr. Hack, is it not? I thought that we had settled our affairs quite definitely."

Hack explained the circumstances occasioning his new

visit. "... and since I am somewhat familiar with the region I was assigned to the project."

Dibden pulled at the tawny beard which lent sagacity to otherwise undistinguished features. He was a large man, taller and heavier than Hack; he wore a simple white blouse, loose white trousers, sandals of soft leather.

Hack explained further: "The cab pilot refused to take me directly to Grangali. With your help, I will proceed from here."

Dibden nodded thoughtfully. "The situation calls for some reflection. Let us step up to the terrace for a goblet of wine."

He led the way up broad steps flanked by monumental alabaster urns trailing ivy, out upon a terrace tiled with quatrefoils of dull blue glass. They sat upon glass chairs splendidly upholstered in red velvet; three maidens in white gowns brought a platter of fruit, travertine goblets, an urn of mild red wine.

Hack leaned back into the chair, pleasantly aware of the slender figures only partially concealed by the near-transparent gauze of the gowns. The nearer he approached Phronus, the less attractive became the prospect. Parnassus, on the other hand . . . Hack said, "I am convinced that you and Parnassus alike would benefit from a Zodiac contract. You would avoid the tedious routine of government. Our charges

are nominal; we usually save our clients as much or more through efficient methods and optimal import-export management."

Dibden nodded and stroked his beard. "These are the views of the Argus Systems representative who passed by yesterday. My response was then and is now: no. We live a contemplative life; we have neither need nor desire for 'efficiency' or 'economic balance' or 'rational organization'. These ideas are the bane of the universe; give me, rather, splendid inefficiency, noble irrationality!"

"Very well," said Hack. "I can write a contract on those terms."

Cyril Dibden gave his head an obdurate shake. "Your services are needed by the Phrones. Luckily for their neighbors, they direct most of their violence against the Sabols. If they could be tamed, taught peace and meditation, how much better for all concerned . . . . Well, I must see to your transportation." Dibden spoke to one of the maidens, and presently a small air-car dropped upon the meadow. Dibden rose to his feet; Hack, recognizing that the idyllic interlude was at an end, did likewise.

"Naturally I wish you the best of luck," said Dibden. "A final word of advice: the Phrones are violent and headstrong. In order to win their confidence you may be forced to compromise certain normal values. In other words,

to steer them, you must lead them."

Hack, wondering what, precisely, Dibden meant, rendered his thanks, climbed aboard the air-car, upon which his luggage had already been loaded. The pilot, a young man with curly auburn hair, a neat beard, a long straight nose, an expression of placid detachment, worked the controls; the car slid off over the countryside. They passed numerous villages, occasionally long low halls which the pilot identified as 'Pansophis temples'.

The landscape became heavily wooded; the pilot took the air-car higher. "The boundary is just ahead," he told Hack. "We maintain a constant lookout, and use the most modern devices to warn us of a raid."

"What happens when the alarms go off?"

"Usually we project a reverberatory field; it heats weapons red-hot." He pointed down at the swath which had been cut through the forest. "The boundary. We are now in Phronus."

They flew up over a range of low mountains, down across the coastal plain, the pilot skimming the tree-tops. At last he settled upon the crest of a hill. "I can take you no closer; these are unpredictable folk, except for their vindictiveness, which is certain." He pointed toward a sprawl of low buildings ten miles distant.

"There is Grangali. You may light a signal fire and so attract attention, although a sect of outcasts—the Left-handers—may see the fire before the 'normals' and kill you. Or you may set out along the trail toward Grangali, again at some peril, for you must be on your guard against pitfalls and ambush."

"What of my gear?"

"Best bury it and return when your status is established. Please descend; I am in haste to return for the vespers."

Hack pointed. "What if I walked along the trail yonder?"

The pilot turned to look and Hack, stepping forward, touched a Dx Dx against the back of his neck. "Sorry, but I don't care to walk. Please take me on down to Grangali."

"If I were not an idealist, you would not have tricked me so easily," grumbled the pilot. "You are as devious as the Phrones."

"I hope so," said Hack. "You need not fear for yourself, or so I hope; they will welcome our arrival."

"Yes, indeed; they will expropriate the air-car."

"If you have such fears, put me down in the center of the city, discharge my luggage and leave before they can come to any such decision."

"Not easy . . . . I will swing in as low to the ground as possible, so that they do not shoot

at us while we are yet aloft. Be prepared to jump from the car with your luggage."

Grangali, an untidy sprawl of stone and timber, was close ahead. The pilot indicated a plaza paved with cobbles. "Probably the most advantageous spot, where the public torturings take place. Please be quick."

He swooped, landed on the cobbles. Hack leapt to the ground; the pilot tossed out the luggage. From a three-story stone building nearby came a dozen Phrones, roaring commands and brandishing weapons.

"Goodby," said Hack. "Convey my thanks to Mr. Dibden."

The pilot took the air-car aloft amidst a shower of missiles, and by a miracle escaped without damage.

The Phrones cursed, made obscene gestures, then turned to Hack. "And who are you?"

"Milton Hack of Zodiac. I assume that you have been expecting me?"

"We expected more than one man and a few suitcases. Where are the great machines? the weapons? the energetics?"

"All in good time," said Hack. "There is no urgency. I am here to make a study of your needs and set up a program."

"Unnecessary. We know our own needs. We will explain our program."

Hack produced a copy of the



contract. "Where are the men who signed this document? Have they returned from Earth?"

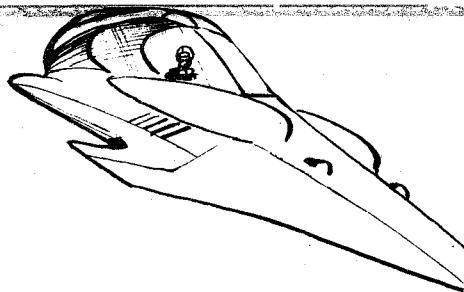
"Hoy! A man who can read; any one at hand?" At last one came forward to examine the signatures. "Lords Drecke, Festus, Matagan: where are they?"

"Here comes Lord Drecke!" The burly citizens of Phronus stood aside to let another come forward, and Hack recognized one of the men who had issued from Edgar's office. As before he clanked and clashed a dozen assorted swords, cutlasses, daggers, poniards as he walked, and his nose was even more splendidly ornamented than Hack had remembered. Not all the Phrones were so embellished; the enormous noses, inlaid with amethysts, rose quartz, liver-stones, appeared to indicate status or rank.

Lord Drecke halted, looked Hack up and down, examined his luggage, then spat upon the ground. "Is this the total outcome of our journey to Earth? Zarius made grand promises. Someone will suffer!"

"I suggest that we continue our talks in a more orderly style," said Hack. "If we are to make any progress whatever, you must submit to a reasonable social discipline."

A gap-toothed grin split Drecke's face. "We are not a submissive folk. Take us as you find us; you must deal with us, not



we with you. This is the function of government!"

Hack wished that by some wonderful mechanism he were able to change places with Edgar Zarius. "If you refuse to cooperate," he told Lord Drecke, "you only cheat yourselves. My salary continues regardless, at your expense, so it is all one to me."

Drecke again showed his grin. "Well then, we might as well make use of you." He jerked his thumb toward a small shack beside a ditch which appeared to serve as latrine and cloacum for the greater part of town. "Lodge yourself younder."

Hack looked around the plaza, which was littered with disorder,

the corpses of dead animals, general filth. The single sound structure appeared to be the three-storied building at his back. "Thank you," said Hack. "I had better stay closer to the government offices, for which I will need the entire third floor of that stone building!"

Drecke stared in outrage. "That is the Nobelman's Lodging Association!"

"I'll make the best of it. What of my luggage?"

"What about it?" growled Drecke with a face like a thundercloud.

"I wish that it should accompany me."

"Bring it along then. Do you expect me to carry it?"

"You or one of your fellows."

Drecke stalked truculently forward. "I must make clear to you that you are not now on Earth. You are surrounded by the men of Phronus, any one of whom is better than your best. Must we then carry your cases?" And Drecke's mood changed to fury: his face flushed purple-red, his mouth tensed and twitched. The crowd began an ominous keening sound.

"Let us reason a moment," said Hack. "You have—"

"Are we your slaves?" roared Drecke. With a sinister hunching of the shoulders, he drew a heavy cutlass from one of his dozen sheaths. Hack held up his hand,

to display a children's toy: a small whirling disk from which darted colored coruscations, sparks, tongues of green and violet flame. Drecke lurched back in alarm.

"Let us reason the matter out," said Hack. "You have hired Zodiac Control to organize a government for you. For such a government to function it must command respect. I represent this government. If I carry this luggage, I forfeit respect. The government thereupon fails. You have wasted your time and your money.

"Secondly: a government is essentially a thing of the people it serves. If you insult the government, you insult the people. I represent this government. If you insult me, you insult yourselves. If I carried the luggage, I, the government, would be shaming and insulting you. If you have pride, you will carry the luggage. If you do not do so, you make yourself ridiculous."

Drecke listened, blinking. "I make myself ridiculous if I don't carry your luggage?"

"Certainly. You traveled to Earth to arrange for a government. If you don't cooperate now that I am here, you become a fool and a laughing-stock before all your fellows."

Drecke shook his head fretfully, so that the golden fobs jangled together. "Who says I am a fool?" He glared around the group.

Hack pointed to the luggage. "Take it to government quarters. I will follow."

But Drecke was dubious. "The government can be served by persons of low prestige." He pointed. "You, Gansen! You, Kertz! Bring the governmental luggage! Steal nothing!"

Hack was conducted, gruffly and without affability, to the large stone structure: the Nobleman's Association. Lord Drecke took him to a dark damp chamber underground, uncomfortably close to the dungeons, which were occupied by a dozen or so Sabols and three miserable Seprissans awaiting ransom.

Hack explained that the chamber outraged his dignity, hence the entire Phrone state; after further grumbling he was taken to more commodious quarters on the third level. The boxes and cases were put down; the porters, under Hack's direction, carried out a large proportion of the previous furnishings.

Drecke stood in the arched doorway with legs apart, arms folded, watching as Hack arranged his belongings. Finally he uttered a great guttural sound, half-belch, half-ejaculation. "Somehow you have tricked me and caused me to lose face; yet I cannot quite define the process. I assure you that I am not a man to be trifled with!"

"This is the least of my in-

tentions," said Hack. "Now to business. As I understand it, Phronus is now controlled by a council of nobles?"

"True," said Drecke. "There are nine members to the conclave. None of us yields in dignity to any other, and we frequently find ourselves at loggerheads."

"There will be an end to this," said Hack. "I will now make all decisions. The conclave of nobles is from this moment dissolved."

Drecke made a series of retching sounds, which Hack perceived to be a laugh. "Best that you break the news to the conclave itself."

"Certainly, if you will be so good as to convene the group."

"All are not in the city. Gafero Magnus is aboard his yawl, pillaging to the south. Sharn Weg has been taken by the Sabols and hangs by his thumbs in the Peraz dungeons. Detwiler arranges an ambush on Opal Mountain, where Sabols continually trespass."

Hack, seating himself, assumed a posture of judicious deliberation. "Assemble those who are available. When Gafero Magnus returns from his pillaging, when Sharn Weg has been lowered to the ground and is able to resume his seat, when Detwiler has arranged the ambush to his satisfaction, we will apprise them of our decisions."

Lord Drecke gave a petulant

grunt. "As good as any." He called over his shoulder, the sound echoing down the stone stairs. "Summon the conclave!" Presently he had a crafty second thought and hurried off down the stairs.

Half an hour later, glancing down into the square, Hack saw Drecke conversing with five men, noses bejeweled and swollen as his own. Making signs of mutual accord, they turned and trooped into the Association building.

Hack seated himself at the table, a slab of solid slate, supported by legs of polished timber, where he had already arranged his information bank, his catalogs and analyzers.

The nobles filed into the room. Hack arose, gave them a dignified greeting. The nobles seated themselves along the table, glancing with interest at Hack's informational aids.

Without preamble or formality Hack set forth his program: "You have made a wise decision in hiring a professional management team. Needless to say, Lords Drecke, Festus and Matagan chose wisely: Zodiac Control is the most expert of all such organizations. Our system of operation is simple. We give our clients the government they need, what they have contracted for, and what they are willing to pay for. We realize and we want you to realize that making improvements

means making changes. When changes are made, someone is inconvenienced, and you must expect a certain amount of dislocation.

"So now — to specifics. I will make a brief survey of Phronus, to learn the areas of urgency. We can't do everything at once. Automatic fire-prevention system is a luxury in a city of shacks and hovels. We won't lay out horticultural gardens until we install a sewer system."

"On the other hand," said the oldest of the nobles, a fox-faced man named Oufia, "there is no point in gilding the lily. Putting sewage underground changes nothing; sewage it is, sewage it remains."

"All in due course," Hack conceded. "Now—as I indicated to Lord Drecke — the Conclave of Nobles, as a policy-making and executive board, has no further basis, and may be considered adjourned. Still, I am anxious to hear suggestions and recommendations. After all, you are the people most intimately acquainted with your own needs."

Lord Drecke cleared his throat, spat on the floor. "Our needs are endless, and, in my opinion, obvious. For instance, the air-car which brought you to the plaza escaped unscathed. We need a radar system and automatic weapon control."

"Our basic problem is Sabo,"

stated Oufia. "Once we expunge the Sabols, we can maraud Parnassus at our leisure."

"Here is another of our urgent needs," Festus pointed out. "A device to confound his sting-field."

Hack listened patiently to each in turn. Then he said, "I begin to understand the scope of your requirements . . . Well then, as to money: I need an initial hundred thousand Universal dollars. This sum will be spent to organize a staff, set up schools, a clinic and start a sanitary program. Then we will build a warehouse, a tool-depot and a sewage system."

The noblemen looked blank. "We must be practical," said Matagan. "As Lord Oufia put it, sewage is sewage. And what avail are schools?"

"To teach children the elements of technical weaponry," explained Hack. "They learn to calculate effective weapon ranges, to read scales and gauges. They gain an understanding of warfare and raiding methods of the past, including, as an incidental, universal history."

The noblemen gave nods of dubious approval. "Children are of little use at an ambush or while sacking a village," grunted Drecke. "They only get in the way, and are killed with the other children."

"Matters for the future," said

Hack. "The schedules in the contract are there to guide us. Incidentally, which of you gentlemen wrote the contract?"

Lord Drecke performed an unctuous wink. "Let us not embarrass the writer. Let sleeping dogs lie."

Hack was unable to follow Drecke's train of thought. "First I, that is to say, your government needs money. Best that we settle this detail now. A hundred thousand dollars—"

Lord Festus made an impatient gesture. "When do the military experts arrive?"

Hack maintained his even demeanor. "If and when the need arises." He considered a moment. "I have warned Cyril Dibden to attempt no aggression. He recognizes that Phronus, under the guidance of Zodiac Control, is a unified and progressive country, and will attempt no mischief."

Lord Prust made an incredulous sound. "Dibden? He poses no threat. We will pillage him and his esthetes at leisure. But the abominable Sabols, aha! We must wipe them out root and stock!"

"First things first," said Hack, "and first is money; then organization, in accordance with the provisions of the contract."

Lord Drecke struck the table with his fist. "Money, money, money! Is this all you think of? How can there be action without

the exercising of flexibility?"

"By 'flexibility' you mean what?"

"Your organization must be prepared to allow a certain latitude. In short: assemble your organization, bring in the necessary weapons and vehicles, both air and ground; then prepare a statement, and present it to us."

Hack gave a crisp negative. "Zodiac will distribute no largesse. Either provide adequate funds or tear up the contract."

Drecke looked around the circle of nobles as if to gauge their shock and amazement. "We expected no such niggardliness; we are a candid people . . . Bah! How much do you require?"

"A million Universal dollars."

Drecke leaned back aghast. "I thought you said a hundred thousand."

"On reflection, a million will provide greater flexibility."

Wrangling ensued, but finally Drecke wrote out a draft to the sum of one hundred and twelve thousand Universal dollars, on the Cordas Bank at Wylandia.

Hack took the draft to his communication box, made contact with the Cordas Bank. The draft, so he was informed, had no validity. Hack turned to Drecke. "There seems to be a mistake."

"Only two counter-signatures and a secret mark," grumbled Drecke. "Turst, Oufia: sign. We are in the presence of a vampire,

who wishes to suck our blood."

Again Hack tested the draft at the bank, and this time it was confirmed.

"Thank you," said Hack. "You may now go about your affairs. Zodiac is in control. I will make a brief survey, then set up my staff. Feel free to confer with me at any time. After all, until we are more formally organized, I am your government."

### Chapter III

Three days passed. Hack insisted on transportation, and from some hidden hoard of loot Drecke brought forth a gilded air-slider with brocade cushions and a tasseled canopy. In this flying plankton Hack, with Lord Drecke beside him as a guarantor, inspected the entire territory of Phronus. The land was varied: marshes to the south, home to voracious saurians and red insects; dark hills to the west along the Parnassus border, a central plain under lackadaisical cultivation. Properly developed, thought Hack, the country would yield a modest prosperity to its inhabitants. There were extensive stands of exotic timber, much in demand on Earth, a generally metamorphic geology indicative of mineral concentrations. Between Parnassus and the sea was a pleasant countryside with the Hartzac foothills beyond. Hack spoke of the possibility of



developing the area as a tourist resort, but Drecke evinced no great interest in the proposal. He pointed northwest, into Parnassus. "Why entice strangers into the country? Far easier to depredate our neighbor Dibden. But first things first: the Sabols must be destroyed!"

He directed Hack along a line of irregular hills, which slanted up to a great crag. "Notice: Opal Mountain, Phrone ground from the earliest times. Can you believe the turpitude of the Sabols? They claim the mountain as their own! They have hired military specialists from Earth, they are importing great quantities of weapons!" He prodded Hack's chest with his finger. "We must strike before they are ready!"

"Argus Systems had the Sabo contract," said Hack. "By no stretch of the imagination are they military specialists, any any more than Zodiac. Furthermore, the import of weapons is impossible; the Contraband Patrol sees to that."

"There are ways, there are ways!" declared Drecke, winking and laying his finger along the cucumber-size lump of his nose.

"The only way you'll have modern weapons is to build them yourself," said Hack, "starting with school, a sound economy, hard work."

"It is time we were returning to Grangali," said Dreck in dis-

gust. "You are a man without vision."

Upon their return Hack found that his quarters had been ransacked. Various articles were missing, including the draught for a hundred and twelve thousand dollars.

Hack sent for Lord Drecke who hulked into the chambers and stared coldly this way and that. Hack reported the crime and listed the missing articles. Drecke gave a bark of incredulous laughter. "This is the Noblemen's Association! You imply that there are thieves among us? This is not a charge to be made frivolously!"

"I am not a frivolous man," said Hack. "I especially deplore the loss of the money paid to Zodiac Control."

"We hold your receipt; if the money is missing the responsibility is yours!" Drecke started to swagger out of the room.

Hack called after him: "What if the thief can be identified?"

Drecke turned in the doorway. "There is no such thief. Only noblemen have access to the Association; to accuse a nobleman of theft is to court a dreadful revenge!"

"What is the penalty for theft?"

"If the theft be proved—and in this case it is either imaginary or deliberately contrived—the offender must pay the injured party double the value of theft and sub-

mit to twenty strokes of the rattan."

"Let us see then." Hack went to a hidden recess and brought forth a camera. He turned back the picture disk, set the camera to project upon a wall. Drecke came reluctantly back into the room.

The image was clear and bright, and depicted Lords Turste, Festus and Anfag, moving without stealth. While Drecke gave snorts of dismay, they pillaged Hack's belongings, gesturing in triumph as they came upon desirable items. When loaded with all they could carry, they left the room.

"Awkward," muttered Drecke. "Awkward indeed. No doubt a prank." The thought cheered him. "Of course! A good-humored prank!"

"Lords Turste, Festus and Anfag are not to be fined and punished?"

Drecke was astounded. "Can you be so sour-souled?"

"Please see that my belongings are returned!"

An hour later Drecke returned with a porter laden with Hack's possessions.

"I must be frank," said Drecke. "Lords Turste, Festus and Anfag are aroused by your accusation. They thought only to amuse themselves, and are angered to find you so surly."

"You maintain them to be humorists?"

"Indeed I do!"

"What if they were shown to be self-confessed thieves?"

"I would strangle them with my own hands! They would have affronted my honor as well as stolen your goods!"

"Well then—once more to the camera. This time we shall listen as well as see."

For a second time Hack and Lord Drecke watched the depredation, and now Hack played back the sound record.

"Aha! Where are the pale devil's valuables?" cried Turste, upon entering the room.

"Here!" called Festus, seizing upon a tabulator. "And I claim this device for my own!"

"Don't be greedy," chided Turste. "There is enough for all."

"The usual system is to cast lots for the more valuable articles," stated Anfag. "This ensures a fair share to each."

"Mind you, the money. This we must find!"

"Hurry then, the fool may return."

"No fear, Drecke has guaranteed to detain him until afternoon."

"No doubt Drecke wants his share!"

"Certainly. Was not this the arrangement?"

Hack turned off the recording. "Well then?"

Drecke's face was swollen and purple. "What scoundrels! Do they hope to implicate me in their

bungling attempt at crime?"

"Let's find them," suggested Hack. "I'll watch while you administer justice."

Drecke, tugging at his bejeweled nose, finally heaved a deprecatory sigh. "It amounts to nothing after all. . . . To heed such scurrility would erode my dignity."

Hack decided that nothing could be served by taking the matter further. "Tomorrow I fly west," he told Drecke, "to communicate with the home office. But now I want to make a statement to the people of Phronus."

"Pah!" spat Drecke. "They are nothing, scarcely better than the Left-handers. Only the nobility is of consequence. The others do as they are told."

"Well then," said Hack, "summon whatever nobles are at hand."

"If you wish to make a statement," said Drecke, "speak to the Conclave. We are the single authority in Phronus."

"You forget," said Hack, "that the Conclave has been dissolved."

Drecke's great rosy mouth twisted in a sneer. "Do you take us for children? The Conclave is as before."

"If that is the case," said Hack patiently, "I will speak to the Conclave."

"As you will."

In due course the nobles sauntered into the chamber, in-

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cluding Lords Turste, Festus and Anfag, who took their places with insouciant ease.

"Since our last meeting," said Hack, "I have inspected the country and am now able to make concrete recommendations."

"First, a staff of twelve men and three women is needed, these from Earth, to supervise approximately forty local people. Secondly, I recommend a cessation of piracy, raids, looting, and most notably thieving." Here Hack turned brief glances upon Lords Turste, Festus and Anfag, who gave back insolent stares. "Thirdly, I will attempt to negotiate a settlement with Sabo. It is my understanding that they have

hired the management control firm of Argus Systems, and we will undoubtedly be able to arrange a compromise of all outstanding difficulties."

Lord Drecke leapt to his feet. "The Sabol vampires must be destroyed!"

"Do not forget the contract!" called Lord Oufia. You are bound to provide weapons and military technicians! We have been assured of this!"

"By whom were you assured?" asked Hack.

"No matter; it is all one. We even gave you money: a hundred and twelve thousand dollars!"

"The money, now that I have recovered it from thieves, must be reserved," said Hack coldly. "For staff salaries, tools, school supplies, and above all, a new sewer."

"Order the weapons additionally," urged Lord Oufia. "You know our requirements. Do not stint. When we have destroyed Sabo, you will be reimbursed."

"Let me make three matters clear," said Hack. "First, Zodiac will provide nothing on speculation."

"This is not speculation; it is investment!" argued Lord Matagan. "You can collect your money from the proceeds of the war—even something extra!"

"Secondly, Zodiac will not participate in rapine, murder and pillage; it is bad for our image.

"Thirdly, weapons are contraband. I can't supply weapons under any circumstances."

Lord Drecke began to sputter. "What benefit then is Zodiac Control? It seems that you are nothing but a tiresome nuisance!"

"What of the contract?" demanded Lord Festus. "You are bound to assist us against our enemies!"

"Other matters are more urgent," said Hack. "The city is a vast slum. You need schools, hospitals, warehouses, a bank, a space-depot, a hotel."

"And meanwhile the Sabols dig our jewels, cut our throats, saunter back and forth across our property? Have you no shame? Give us at least the means of defense!"

"It may not be necessary, if we can arbitrate the difficulty."

Drecke again sprang to his feet, but old Lord Oufia pulled him down. "What do you propose?"

"Argus Systems, as you know, manages Sabo. I will get in touch with the Argus superintendent; we will talk together and try to work out a compromise. We have no prejudices, no preconceptions; you can expect an equitable outcome."

"We don't want an equitable outcome!" stormed Lord Festus. "We want revenge, and Opal Mountain as well."

Lord Drecke thrust his florid countenance forward. "Do you

think that we would trust our interests to a man so niggling? The idea is preposterous."

Lord Oufia said, "Not so fast. There is no harm in trying for an advantage of some kind. But the Conclave must conduct the talks!"

Hack protested that such an arrangement would be cumbersome and tend to intemperate demands. "The Argus superintendent and I, talking calmly together, can work out a fair settlement of the quarrel. This is the only sensible way to handle the situation."

Lords Drecke and Festus reacted so vehemently that Lord Oufia threw up his hands in disgust. "This is how it must be: the arbitration will take place, but only three lords will participate: myself, Lord Drecke, Lord Turste. I believe even this Earth milk-nose will see the folly of trying to deal with the Sabol criminals."

Hack was forced to be content with this arrangement. The meeting adjourned; the lords swaggered from the chamber, clashing and jangling, and each passing Hack's chair, turned down a glance of menace, contempt or derision. Hack shrugged. He had won a minor concession: the nobles at least had agreed that the difficulties with Sabo were negotiable. Turning to his communication-box, he sent out a pulse on the Argus band.

There was an instant response, almost as if the Argus representative had been waiting for the call. A voice spoke: "Argus Systems. Sabo Contract, at Peraz, Sabo; Ben Dickerman here."

"This is Milton Hack of Zodiac, at Grangali. We have the Phronus Contract, as you may have heard."

"Ah yes: Hack." Dickerman's face appeared on the screen: a sallow face with harried clamps around the mouth, a fluttering tick of the left eyelid. "We've met before. Weren't you involved at Isbetta Roc?"

"Yes," said Hack, "I was—well, on the scene."

"'On the scene'?" Dickerman laughed sadly, as if at some tragicomic recollection. "Still, so I recall, the contract went to Efficiency Associates."

"There was trouble with the Zamindar's mother. A peculiar woman. . . . Well, that's all in the past. How is the contract going at Peraz?"

Dickerman's face once more became dismal. "Well enough. I'm prepairing a structure analysis, working out organization . . . . A challenging job, really." The attempt at a brave front collapsed. "Between you and me—" he paused, then burst out in a bitter spate of words: "It's the most miserable situation I've ever been in. The city—if you can call it a city—is unbelievable. The

stench, the filth, the monumental sordidness: beyond imagination!"

"Grangali is much the same," said Hack. "Probably worse."

"Not a chance." A spark of animation came to Dickerman's face. He hitched himself forward. "I'll lay a friendly wager—say ten dollars—that Paraz is fouler than Grangali. Are you on?"

"I don't think so," said Hack. "Still—you'd have to produce something dramatic to defeat the Grangali sewer."

"No one seems to care," Dickerman complained. "No one wants clean streets and new houses; they want to slaughter Phrones. They want death-rays, armored robots, automatic cannon."

"The same way at this end," said Hack. "The bone of contention seems to be Opal Mountain. I've been wondering whether you and I could use our influence to arrange some kind of settlement."

Dickerman gave his head a peevish shake. "I don't have any influence. They can cut each other to ribbons, so long as I get my salary, although, this is doubtful unless the peace is preserved."

"I've persuaded the Phrones at least to talk to the Sabols," said Hack. "Why not broach the matter to your side?"

Dickerman made a dubious sound. "They don't want to talk;

they want to run berserk. From somewhere they received the impression that we'd bring in shiploads of weapons and help them blast Phronus into the sea. They think I'm dragging my feet; they won't give me my money. They want Argus to finance the war and share in the plunder."

"We've been offered the same proposition," said Hack. "Tell your people the only way to settle the matter is compromise, and to compromise they've got to talk."

"It wouldn't work," gloomed Dickerman. "They'd be like scorpions in a bottle. We couldn't control the situation."

"We don't have to bring them face to face," said Hack with a trace of asperity. "They can talk by radio. You bring a deputation to your offices. I'll do the same here."

"Useless, useless, useless."

"Try this," said Hack. "Tell them Phronus wants to settle the dispute and is appealing to their generosity."

Dickerman gave a caw of near-hysterical laughter, but finally agreed to make the effort.

#### Chapter IV

At the appointed hour Lords Oufia, Drecke and Turste hulked into Hack's chambers, reeking with a dire thick-blooded ferocity. Their plaits were newly var-



nished, silver cheek-plates framed and accented the bejeweled bulbs of their noses.

"Well then," grated Lord Drecke, "turn on your radio; we will hear what they have to say."

The conference began, by radio only, Hack's theory being that the transfer of images would serve only as incitement. Hack and Dickerman performed the introductions, which were acknowledged on both sides with sardonic restraint.

Hack said, "Our purpose is to reconcile the differences which have alienated your two great states. I think our first step should be to recognize that all of us are basically men of good will—"

He was interrupted by Drecke's muttered remark: "How can Left-handers be considered men?"

Hack and Dickerman both frantically spoke: Hack chiding Lord Drecke; Dickerman trying to suppress the furious retorts of his group. But the situation did not mend itself. There were claims and counter-claims, invective and threats. Hack and Dickerman pled fruitlessly for moderation.

"I personally will hurl your defiled corpses into the sea!" belled Drecke.

"Step forward and meet me face to face!" challenged the Sabol Duke Gomaz. "Craven that you are, taking refuge in distance! Your right-handed cowardice stinks from here!"

Hack surreptitiously turned off the radio. For some minutes Lords Drecke, Festus and Turste raged furiously at the instrument, not realizing that it was offering no response. Finally they stamped from the room, cursing and belching and congratulating each other.

Hack sat limp. The contract was a farce. He brought out the draught given him by Drecke. He should have cashed it at once; unlikely that it was still negotiable. Stung by the thought, Hack jumped to his feet. He packed a case with the most valuable of his belongings, went to the roof where he found the flying palanquin. He threw his case aboard, took off. Certain of the noblemen came out into the plaza to look up and shake their fists; one or two desultory shots were fired: casual insults rather than serious efforts to inflict injury.

Hack pushed the palanquin to its top speed, a stately fifty miles an hour, and in due course reached Seprissa. He rode by air-cab south to Colmar, terminus of the weekly cross-continent air-service and was lucky enough to make an almost immediate connection.

A day later he walked the streets of Wylandia. Great trees rose above him, home to thousands of fluttering white creatures: jerboas with moth-wings.

Along the sidewalk were booths, offering cool drinks, fruit and skewered morsels of meat with tantalizing odors. The streets were clean, the inhabitants polite, the moth-winged jerboas made pleasant chirping sounds. . . . Hack felt as if he had emerged from a hallucination. He came to the Cordas Bank, a long low structure with a facade of woven glass. He entered, took the Phrone draught to a wicket. The draught was honored, the funds paid into the Zodiac account. Hack was surprised and disappointed. Had the draught not cleared he could reasonably have washed his hands of the entire contract. . . . He crossed the street to the communications center, put through an inquiry to the Cordas System Post Office at Spaceport on Lucia Cordas.

The response returned affirmative. An automatic printer ejected the message, folded and sealed, stamped with Hack's name and the transmissio charges.

Hack paid the fee, unsealed the letter, which had been sent by Edgar Zarius, apparently no later than two days before, if Hack's quick calculations were accurate.

The information contained in the message was unsettling:

Milton Hack, Zodiac Control  
Poste Restante, Wylandia  
Ethelrinda Cordas

To date no report has been received from you in regard to the Phronus contract. Presumably all is going well. I hope this reaches you before your operative plans solidify. In order to maximize efficiency and minimize cost, I have purchased the Sabo contract from Argus Systems, Incorporated.

You will therefore amalgamate operations to the fullest extent and administer both programs through a central agency.

You will notify Mr. Ben Dickerman, Argus representative at Paraz, Sabol, of the altered circumstances, and instruct him to return to Earth.

You will take control of all money paid into the Argus account by Sabol authorities, and pay this money into the Zodiac account, for the funding of the joint Phronus-Sabo contract.

Please prepare and file a preliminary report at your soonest convenience, so that we may get this project rolling.

Edgar Zarius, President  
Zodiac Control, Incorporated  
Farallon, North America  
Earth

Hack sank slowly upon a stone bench to re-read the letter. He

folded it, tucked it into his shirt, sat staring blankly off across the motley Old Town, standing on stilts above San Remo Bay. For a space Hack's mind moved sluggishly. Only by degrees did the issues take shape. He began to recognize possible courses of action.

First of all, he could return to the east coast and implement Edgar Zarius' instructions. . . . Or he could urge Edgar to sell, or give, both contracts to Argus. Or he could resign his connection with Zodiac, take a suite at the Marlene Hildenbrand Hotel and settle himself upon the verandah for a month. . . . His decision was preordained, and derived from a perverse quirk in his mentality. At his deepest, most essential level, Hack knew himself for an insipid mediocrity, of no intellectual distinction and no particular competence in any direction. This was an insight so shocking that Hack never allowed it past the threshold of consciousness, and conducted himself as if the reverse were true. So, while his innermost elements winced and grimaced, Hack, outwardly easy and composed, made plans to cope with the new situation.

He returned to the communications depot, despatched a message:

Edgar Zarius, President  
Zodiac Control, Incorporated

Farallon, North America  
Earth

Your message received. The situation at Phronus is confused. There are many cross-purposes. I have not yet been able to set up a primary organization. I will follow your instructions in regard to Sabo as best I can. As soon as I am able to make definite recommendations, I will notify you.

Milton Hack  
Poste Restante  
Wylandia, Ethelrinda Cordas

An absolute necessity was an air-car. At Wylandia there was a single agency which sold the Stranflite line at inflated prices, which caused Hack small concern. For fifteen thousand dollars he bought a deluxe blue Merlin four-seater, loaded with options: macroscope, automatic controls with ever-visible charting, platform ride, a three-year energy cell, commode, beverage dispenser, sunscreen which allowed the entry of light but gave the sun the semblance of a black disk: in short, an environment far more comfortable than his quarters in the dank Noblemen's Association at Grangali.

Hack was in no hurry to leave Wylandia. He explored the Old Town, sauntering along the rick-

ety walkways like a tourist, occasionally buying some oddment which caught his fancy. He dined in a restaurant hanging five hundred feet above ground in the branches of a tree, riding up in a birdcage-like contrivance dangling on a ropel and from the vantage of the terrace watched sunset fall over the city and the ocean beyond. Phronus and Sabo seemed remote indeed.

Descending in the bird-cage he walked out the dog-leg pier to the hotel and passed the night. In the morning he could find no reason, rational or irrational, to delay. He climbed, somewhat heavy-footed, into the Stranflite Merlin and flew east.

For thirty miles the land was inhabited and the soil cultivated, up to the very base of the Inland Barrier, a scarp rising a sheer mile. Beyond stretched the primeval interior of Robal Cordas. Hack set the controls to automatic; the Merlin flew quietly east.

Something after midnight local time he passed above Cyril Dibden's palace. A ball or festival was in progress; Hack glimpsed soft white lights, color and movement, then he was over and beyond, with the gloomy mountains ahead, and presently these too were behind him. In the east spread the ocean, with two of the four moons, thin as scimitars, casting light trails.

Hack veered north, over Opal

Mountain, and into Sabo. Peraz was dark, with the exception of two or three flickering orange lights.

Hack set the Merlin to sweeping wide slow circles at an altitude of five thousand feet, stretched himself out and went to sleep. He awoke at dawn, took stock of himself and his surroundings.

The new moons were fading; the sky was a bowl of violet and electric blue; the landscape was a black crumple without detail. Hack flicked on the radio, called the Argus frequency. The response bulb presently glowed. "Dickerman speaking."

"Hack here."

"Where in thunder have you been?" Dickerman's voice was putlant. "I've called you twenty time!"

"What's the trouble?"

"More than trouble. The whole shebang has gone up in our faces. Your confounded Phrones are invading. They've pushed ten miles across Opal Mountain. The people here can't be controlled."

For an undisciplined instant Hack thought to flick off the radio and return at full speed to Wylandia. He finally regained use of his voice. "I'm afraid I have bad news for you," he said dolefully.

Dickerman's voice went almost falsetto with apprehension. "'Bad news'? How so?"

"You're out of a job. Zodiac

has bought the Sabo contract from Argus. The powers that be figured they could run two jobs cheaper than one.'

Dickerman's voice quivered. "You're not pulling my leg?"

"Absolutely not. I'll show you my orders, or you can call your home office."

"No, no!" exclaimed Dickerman. "I accept your word. Oh my, yes. How soon will you take over?"

"I'm right above you. Where do I land?"

"On the Charterhouse, near the waterfront. What are you flying?"

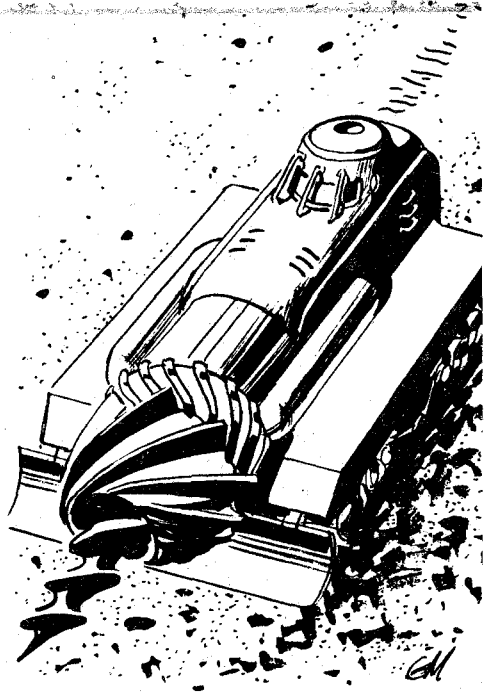
"A Stranflite Merlin, blue, with white underhull. Make sure your people don't shoot me as I come in."

"I'll do my best."

Hack traced the outline of the shore and finally located Peraz. He dropped vertically down upon the largest structure visible: a menacing stone block on a spit of rock overlooking the harbor. He landed on the flat roof without hostile demonstration of any sort: not so much as a shot or a hurled stone.

Dickerman stood waiting, his face alight, almost twitching with hope.

Hack asked why his arrival has aroused such small attention. "There's no one of fighting-age in town!" explained Dickerman. "They've all gone south to fight the Phrones." He conducted Hack



down the stone stairs to his office, where he set all lamps aglow and prepared a pot of tea. Hack brought out the letter from Edgar Zarius, but Dickerman waved it aside. "Your word is enough for me. . . . I don't have much to turn over to you: mainly the contract." He tossed the document on the table. Hack read, at first with interest, then perplexity. Here, provision for provision, was a duplicate of the Phronus contract.

Dickerman became apprehensive. "Something wrong?"

"No. Nothing in particular."

"It's a droll contract," said Dickerman. "Argus doesn't have too many jobs going, or I don't

think they'd have taken it. In fact. . . ." Tactfully he cut himself short.

Hack made no comment, still puzzled by the peculiar identity of the contracts. A stock form, obtainable at Colmar or Wylandia? The work of an itinerant negotiator? Had there been consultation between Phronus and Sabo?

Dickerman interrupted Hack's cogitations. "Your first concern is the war. Candidly, I don't quite understand how you'll be able to merge operations." Here Dickerman hastily held up his hand. "Not to discourage you, of course."

Hack laughed. "No fear. Everything's under control, merely a matter of organization. I'll arrange a truce, work out some kind of compromise. These people aren't totally irrational."

"Of course not. Perhaps you can take me into Seprissa."

"Certainly. But first I'll want you to introduce me to the Sabo authorities."

Dickerman gave a wry wince. "I suppose it's only appropriate. They're all out under Opal Mountain."

Dickerman gathered his gear; they went up to the roof, boarded the Merlin, rose into the sky. The sun was now high: big yellow Martin Cordas, the light slanting across the rolling, oddly beautiful countryside. Ahead loomed

Opal Mountain and the turmoil.

"According to my information," said Dickerman, "the Phrones came down east of the mountain: they plundered Slagnas Lodge, marauded through Broken Bone Valley. . . ." He used the macroscope to search the landscape and presently pointed. "There's the Sabol camp. We'd better land somewhat out of gunshot range. . . ."

Hack landed the Merlin in a field two hundred yards below the camp, which was surrounded by tall black and white battle trucks, evidently of local manufacture, the rude and irregular wheels powered by indestructible torque-cells.

Hack and Dickerman alighted, waited by the air-car as the Sabol war-leaders came forward: men massive and heavy-featured like the Phrones, their noses similarly inlaid and encrusted with jewels. The fobs had been detached from the coarse black plaited hair, which now was coiled under war-bonnets. In scabbards at each side of the waist harness they carried a dozen or more daggers, cutlasses and swords, while strapped under their arms were pellet guns, rocket launchers, lasers, of antique design and, Hack suspected, of small efficacy.

Dickerman gingerly performed introductions: "Duke Gassman, Duke Holox. . . ." And finally: "I present to you my successor:



Mr. Milton Hack of Zodiac Control. He is an expert military strategist, as well as an economic authority; with your cooperation he will solve the various problems of Sabo."

"We have only a single problem," grunted Duke Gassman. "How best to destroy the repulsive Phrones. Which is difficult when they refuse to face us in combat."

"Strange," said Hack. "I understood them to be resolute fighters."

"By no means. Only this morning we sent them hopping and skipping. We are bringing down reinforcements from a skirmish to the north; then we intend to strike deep into Phronus. We will need weapons: you must provide them!"

"Weapons are contraband merchandise," said Hack. "Smuggled weapons are expensive. How much can you afford to pay?"

Duke Gassman made a peremptory gesture. "Furnish the weapons; later we will talk of pay!"

At the moment, thought Hack, there was small hope of presenting his point of view convincingly. "I will survey the terrain. In the meantime, instruct your men under no circumstances to fire on my air-car."

Duke Gassman, making an incomprehensible sound in his throat, swung away.

Hack flew Dickerman to Seprissa; Dickerman nimbly jumped from the Merlin, as if he feared that Hack might decide to take him north again. Hack returned to the air and flew north to Grangali, landing in the plaza before the Noblemen's Association. Like Peraz, Grangali seemed deserted. Hack, making inquiry, learned that all able-bodied warriors had taken the field against Sabo.

Once again Hack took the Merlin aloft. He flew high, and hovering above Opal Mountain, studied the ground below.

To the east of the mountain was the Sabol camp which he had visited during the morning; to the west, on a plateau overlooking the Sabol plain, he discovered another encampment, apparently that of the Phrone war party. Hack landed the Merlin somewhat to the north of the camp, and awaited the arrival of the Phrone leaders.

Lord Drecke marched in the van, daggers and swords clashing with each step. In addition to his usual costume Drecke wore enormous epaulettes fashioned from the carapace of a sea-beetle, with decorations fashioned from human jaw-bones and teeth. He halted directly in front of Hack, who moved back a step to avoid the organic reek characteristic of Phrone and Sabol alike.

Drecke, obviously in a villainous mood, scowled down at Hack.

"Well then, your news?" he barked. "The weapons are on order? What is the precise date of delivery?"

"All in good time," said Hack. He indicated the camp. "Why are you here, instead of back at Grangali, repairing the sewer or doing something useful?"

Drecke half-drew a cutlass. "Do I hear aright?"

"You hear the voice of your government, in which you have invested one hundred and twelve thousand dollars."

"Bah," sneered Drecke. "The Sabols thought to catch us unawares. They attacked down Opal Mountain; we charged, sent them screaming back like the left-handed popinjays they are. We now await a reconnaissance squad which fought a skirmish somewhat to the west; then we invade Sabo."

Hack gave his head a disapproving shake. "A rash act."

"Quite the reverse," maintained Drecke. "It is a precautionary war. A great corporation of Earth has allied itself with the Sabols. They are receiving high-quality weapons by the shipload."

"Nothing of the sort," said Hack. "Earth corporations supply nothing unless they are paid in advance."

"This is not the language of our contract," called Lord Anfag over Drecke's shoulder. "Zodiac Control must supply goods

stores, munitions and weapons at demand."

"Whereupon you must pay for them promptly," Hack reminded him. "Which is to say, within three seconds."

"I doubt if you have our interests truly at heart," complained Drecke. "Are we not your clients?"

"You are indeed, and Zodiac expects your cooperation. Otherwise you waste your money."

"Once we expunge the Sabols matters will be different," declared Lord Drecke. "It is to your best interests to provide us the weapons we need: death-rays, automatic killers, eye-guided rockets, dazzle flares." A shout attracted his attention. "The reconnaissance squad returns." And Lord Drecke marched away to greet the leader of the platoon, which was mounted on a troop of hammerheaded yellow ponies. They conferred a moment or two, then with a sweeping gesture Drecke roused the entire company into motion.

Hack stepped into the Merlin and took it aloft before Lord Drecke thought to commandeer his services.

## Chapter V

Hack hovered above Opal Mountain, watching as the armed bands came together for what both had vowed would be a cli-

mactic battle, a massacre of the opposing force.

With great care the Phrones and Sabols maneuvered for advantage, each trying to win the high ground, but each being repelled by darting sorties of the other's cavalry.

Little by little the encounter worked itself down to the plain, as if impelled by the force of gravity. Hack drifted overhead in the Merlin, marveled at the complicated maneuvers. There were feints, lunges, massing and shifting of forces, but very little fighting, and wherever such fighting occurred, unless either side could bring an overwhelming force to bear, it was quickly broken off.

The Phrones and Sabols were not necessarily cowards, thought Hack; they merely did not wish to be killed.

The battle continued most of the afternoon, and began to subside, both armies drooping with fatigue, an hour before sundown. Considering the number of men involved, the skirmishing and maneuvers, the charges and retreats, there had been few casualties indeed.

With the coming of sunset both armies drew back. Baggage wagons, which had remained untended during the battle, were trundled up; bonfires were built, cauldrons hung on tripods, and the armies settled down for their evening meal. Hogsheads of wine

were broached; the Phrones and Sabols drank, and becoming elevated, danced hornpipes and jigs to the music of tambourines, rattles and horns. Others swaggered out to the edge of the firelight to peer across at the opposing camp; here they postured and threatened, performed indecent antics, bawled insults and bluster, then, after some final grossness, returned to the applause of their fellows.

The sky became dark; two moons rose full in the east; half the pale blue moon hung overhead. The bonfires burnt low; grumbling and complaining the warriors wrapped themselves in robes and hulked down in untidy bundles to sleep.

Hack landed the Merlin on a nearby ridge. It seemed that both parties to the conflict were too arrogant, too torpid, too lazy to worry about a night raid. Twenty deft men could slit every throat in both camps. No question as to Phrone blood-thirstiness or Sabol courage. Still, neither cared for undue risk or inconvenience. Hence, reflected Hack, the emphasis on weapons of long-range destruction: which suggested a crafty subterfuge.

He took the Merlin aloft, returned to his quarters at Grangali, where he elaborated on his plot.

On the following day, the armies awoke, quarrelled among

themselves, fed, loaded the wagons, donned their war costumes, and about mid-morning resumed the battle. The participants were now becoming bored with the sport and maneuvered with less zest and daring than that which had marked the action of the day before.

During the heat of mid-afternoon, both armies drew back to refresh themselves with wine, to bind such wounds as they had incurred, to enlarge upon their exploits and jeer at the enemy warriors, little more than two hundred yards distant. It was discovered that the baggage trucks were empty of provisions. After a final exchange of taunts and obscenities, both armies flung their weapons and gear into the wagons and set off toward their respective cities.

The following day Hack requested a meeting of the Conclave. In due course the group came swaggering and sneering into the chambers.

"How went the battle?" asked Hack.

"Well enough, well enough," responded Lord Drecke. "We sent the vermin scuttling; they will not stand to fight. Why do you not provide us weapons so that we can give them what they deserve?"

"I have gone over this ground before," said Hack. "Weapons are illegal contraband; Zodiac

Control will supply nothing that you are unwilling to pay for."

"Bring us weapons!" stated Lord Oufia. "We will pay!"

"As you know, I am an expert military strategist," said Hack. "I have evolved a scheme which I believe will satisfy everyone. It is a subtle plan and somewhat long-range, and it will require a large outlay of money, but—"

Lord Drecke interrupted roughly, "What is the plan?"

"How would you like to press a button," asked Hack, bringing to his normally expressionless face what he hoped to be a leer, "and instantly blow all Paraz sky-high?"

Lords Drecke, Oufia, Anfag, Turste and the others sat back in their chairs. "But you claim you can buy no weapons!"

"I can buy mining machinery. Do you realize that a power mole can tunnel the distance to Paraz in perhaps thirty days? I can buy explosive. No problem there."

Drecke spat on the floor. "Why did we not think of this ourselves? We need not have performed that old epicene's elaborate rigamarole."

"What old epicene?" asked Hack. "What elaborate rigamarole?"

"No matter, no matter. What will all this cost?"

Hack went to his information box, ran his fingers over the

buttons. "There are eight or ten varieties of mole. Some with mechanical jaws, others with rotary cutters. This particular device—" he paused at a holograph—melts the rock ahead and rams it aside to form a cylindrical tube walled with dense glass." He brought another picture to the screen. "This model melts the rock, shapes it into building blocks and loads a conveyor with the blocks. It is cheaper, and for our purposes preferable, since it is noiseless."

"And the cost?" demanded Anfag.

"This particular model, which melts a tube eight feet in diameter, sells for three hundred thousand dollars. I can arrange a discount of five percent for cash. Explosives? Another twenty or thirty thousand dollars. We want to do a thorough job. A trained crew is a necessity: a surveyor, three operators, three mechanics, an energetics technician, an explosion engineer, a tramline engineer, three tramline operators, an accountant, a payroll clerk, a cybernetician. We will bring in temporary housing, and there will be no need to vacate this building. You will supply whatever unskilled labor is required."

"The total?" inquired Anfag.

"In the neighborhood of half a million dollars, which will include ten percent to Zodiac."

The Phrone nobles rolled their

eyes upward. "A large sum," intoned old Oufia.

Hack shrugged. "What do you think weapons cost, even if you were able to buy them?"

Drecke said briskly, "Our comrade has produced a sound scheme! Which of us is so penurious that he would not welcome the opportunity to blow Peraz to smithereens once and for all?"

"At really a trifling cost," mused Anfag.

"So be it," declared Oufia. "We will declare a special tax, and it will cost none of us a great deal."

"Give me a draught upon the Cordas Bank at Wylandia," suggested Hack, "and I will set affairs into motion at once."

Hack flew the Merlin to Peraz where he called the Dukes to the Charterhouse for an important conference.

"I observed the recent battle," said Hack. "While I was much impressed by Sabol tactics, I can see that they will never defeat the Phrones."

"Agreed," said Duke Gassman. "And why? Because they refuse to fight! They are dodgers, dancers, they run this way and that, they hide among the rocks. It is pointless trying to come to grips with them!"

"Weapons!" rumbled Duke Bodo. "We insist that you per-

form according to the terms of the contract!"

Hack once again explained that his company was unable to deal in weapons, owing to the rigid weapon-licensing laws of Earth. "However, there is no law which prevents us from importing mining machinery."

"What avail is mining machinery?" Duke Wegnes demanded. "Do you take us for troglodytes?"

"Quiet!" commanded Duke Gassman. "The man has something at the back of his mind. Speak on, Earthman."

"What would be your reaction to a scheme for blowing Grangali into the sea?" asked Hack.

Duke Gassman made a fretful movement. "Waste no more of our time with idle questions. Is the project feasible or is it not?"

"It is feasible," said Hack. "It will cost a considerable amount of money, but far less than an equally effective arsenal of weapons."

"Money is of no account," declared Duke Bodo. "We will spend any amount on a worthwhile purpose. What then is your plan?"

"We will need a tunneling machine. Please give your attention to the catalogue. . . ."

## Chapter VI

Edgar Zarius, looking over Hack's requisition, frowned in perplexity, then nodded slowly.

He reflected a moment, then put through a call to Lusiane Ludlow who eventually was traced to the lounge of the St. Francis Yacht Club, at the foot of the Marina in San Francisco.

Her face appeared on the screen. "Yes?"

"Nothing urgent," said Edgar. "I thought you might like to hear the news from Ethelrinda Cordas."

Lusiane's face for a moment was blank. "Oh, of course. I thought, for a moment—but never mind. That's the planet where—excuse me, Edgar." She looked aside to speak to someone beyond Edgar's range of vision, and returned smiling to the screen. "Ethelrinda Cordas, out in the Cordas System where we have those two ridiculous contracts. I suppose they've blown up in our faces, as I predicted?"

"Not so ridiculous," said Edgar stiffly. "Hack has set things straight as I knew he would. I've got a requisition here for mining machinery, supplies, technicians—a fairly large crew, somewhat unbalanced, I suppose. . . ."

Lusiane's eyebrows became straight lines over her beautiful blue eyes. She hated to be proved wrong. "Requisition—what about payment?"

"Oh, the money's here too. Hack usually does things right, for all his peculiarities."

"Between you and the insuffer-



able Hack," snapped Lusiane, "I don't know whom to feel the most thankful to." She broke off the connection, leaving red concentric rings on Edgar's screen.

Edgar smiled faintly. A certain degree of gloating, after all, was in order. His vision, his acumen, has been vindicated. He had been proved right. Hack had rejected the Sabol contract, disapproved of the Phronus contract, Lusiane had ridiculed both, and now both contracts had been demonstrated sound conservative ventures.

Edgar, well pleased with himself, signed the requisition and tucked it into the out-slot.

The moles arrived at Wylandia in a single crate, as did the auxiliary items. Hack ordered a separation and repacking of the equipment into two similar parcels, and arranged for trans-shipment to Peraz and to Grangali.

The two crews arrived a few days later, and for a time Hack was extremely busy. He started the sub-Grangali tunnel from a point near the border but concealed from Phrone observation by a dense grove of dicalyptic sapodillas.

The sub-Peraz tunnel had its origin no great distance away on the Phronus side of the border, into an eroded mountain of limestone, slate and an odd bluestone which Hack tentatively identified as dumortierite.

The tunnels proceeded at an



average rate of a mile a day, at a mean depth of a hundred feet below the surface. Each mole jetted forward a cone of irresistible heat; the rock, whatever its composition, melted to magma, which when tamped and molded yielded vitreous bricks, which were then automatically loaded on cars, trundled to the mouth of the tunnel and stacked under the trees.

Hack spent half of the time in Phronus, half in Sabol, conferring with the grandees of the two cities. Both groups were much impressed by the efficiency of the Zodiac management, and Hack was held in great esteem.

Thirty-five days after the first

ground-breaking, the surveyor in charge of the sub-Peraz tunnel announced that Hack's requirements had been met. The tunnel described a circle under the city, extended in a pair of spurs under outlying districts.

The mole was withdrawn; the explosive engineer loaded the tram with crates, electronic gear, charts and detonation schedules.

Something under three days later the same sequence of events occurred in Sabo, in connection with the sub-Grangali tunnel.

## Chapter VII

The Phrone nobles were jovial, almost boisterous, as they filed into Hack's quarters on the third level of the Noblemen's Association and took their accustomed seats. Stewards poured beakers of smoky brown wine, set out small tubs of 'tongue-stabber,' the stimulating black paste used by Phrones and Sabols alike.

The group composed itself. Lord Drecke turned to Hack. "What is the outlook for the next few days?" And he turned a wink of elephantine humor down the table.

"The project, as of now," said Hack, "is in the 'Ready' condition. Directly below Peraz is a precisely calculated pattern of charges which will obliterate that vile pigsty of a city."

Drecke blinked. "I had never

thought of Peraz in quite those terms. It is a city not unlike Grangali. . . ."

"No place for sentiment!" called Lord Oufia. "It is home to the Sabols! It must be destroyed!"

"I will take it upon myself to touch the activating button!" proffered Lord Anfag.

"Best leave that responsibility me," said Hack. "Detonation time will be mid-morning, the day after tomorrow, in case anyone wishes to station himself where he can witness the event, perhaps from the shore of the Merrydew estuary, or on Kicking Horse Ridge."

Somewhat later the same day Hack addressed the Council of Grandees in the Charterhouse at Peraz. "I am pleased to report that the tunnel is complete. Demolition charges have been arranged below Grangali. I have scheduled detonation for the day after tomorrow, sometime during the morning, if such an hour suits the convenience of all." Hack looked questioningly from face to face, but no one put difficulties in the way.

"Very well," said Hack. "Mid-morning of the day after tomorrow."

## Chapter VIII

On the following day Hack transported the tunnel crews and

office personnel to Seprissa; the Phrones and Sabols were an unpredictable people, especially when excited.

The night passed: a balmy summer night disturbed only by revelry at both Peraz and Grangali. Hack elected to sleep aboard the Merlin, which he set down on a westerly crag of Opal Mountain.

The sun Martin Cordas rose; Hack awoke, stepped out of the air-car to stretch his legs. He had nothing to do now but wait. He sat on a rock, looked over the valley. To the left, barely visible across the broad Merrydew, was the gray and black sprawl of Peraz. To the right, somewhat closer, was Grangali.

The sun swung up into the sky. Hack took the Merlin aloft. He slid out over Grangali. In the macroscope he inspected the wasteland immediately south of the city. He saw no one; the area was empty. Hack selected the small black box marked 'Grangali', arranged it on the console. With his forefinger he touched the button on its face.

The wasteland disappeared beneath a vast eruption of dirt, garbage and stones. Hack gave a satisfied nod: excellent. Precisely accurate.

A half-minute later came another explosion, a hundred yards north of the first, then another, and another, each an ominous hundred yards closer to the out-

skirts of Grangali. The dismal shacks at the city's edge poured forth their occupants who stood gaping at the advancing front of destruction. They retreated to the north, to avoid falling debris. There were further explosions, shattering the south slums, herding the residents north. Throughout all of Grangali was confusion and presently a pell-mell flight north.

Hack swung the Merlin out across Sabo. He hovered above the mud flats east of the city, where a single glance assured him that the area was untenanted. Again and with the same nicety of motion he arranged the signal box marked "Peraz" on the console, touched the button. The mud flats exploded.

The nobles of Phronus, awaiting the destruction of Peraz on the shoras of the Merrydew River, were startled by the rumble of continuing explosions from the direction of Grangali. Certain of the group wanted to ride for home as swiftly as possible, but even as the argument was in progress Peraz began to disintegrate. Blast after blast marched across the landscape.

The Phrones watched with mixed feelings. "To many Sabols are escaping!" cried Anfa in irritation. "The explosions were poorly conducted!"

Lord Drecke gave a grunt of disgust. "Not satisfactory. I will

(Continued on page 156)

# BLABBERMOUTH

by Theodore Sturgeon



*Another vintage Ted Sturgeon story for those of us—and that must mean all of you out there—still haunted by “Saucer of Loneliness” and “The Man Who Lost the Sea.” This time not about loneliness on a cosmic scale or the first crash-landing (fatal) on Mars—but a slick, fast-moving account of subtle possession and a girl named Maria, who should have made radio m.c. Eddie Gretchen the perfect wife—if only she hadn’t turned out to be such an incredible . . .*



SHE was a lovely thing, and before either of us knew it my arms were around her and her deep eyes were all tangled up in mine. I held her a little too close a little too long, I guess; she squirmed away, got her balance and brushed me off like so much pretzel-juice.

"Sorry," I lied.

A winged eyebrow went up as two heavy lids went down. "That's all right," she said. Her voice like the sound of a cello whispering in the low register. "But you really ought to signal for a turn." I'd been trying to whip in front of a rotund individual who was about to climb into the taxi I wanted to get, and in doing so had almost knocked the girl off her feet. She turned away just in time to miss the practiced click of my heels as I tipped my hat. I sighed and flagged another cab. I had a lot of friends and knew a lot of glamour, and until this minute I had flattered myself on having a pretty picturesque string of 'em in my little black book. But now—well, I could only wish I had seen her somewhere before. She reminded me of someone I used to know a few years back, when I really was a bigshot. Instead of running an all-night radio program and writing feature articles on the side, I used to be a Power. I was in high-school and managed

the basketball team. I cut a lot of ice and a lot of corners.

I stepped into the cab and gave the address of the restaurant where I was supposed to meet Sylvia. That was a date I'd worked hard to get, and now for some strange reason, I had little stomach for it. I stared out of the side window as the taxi drew past the girl I'd just run into. She was walking slowly, apparently looking at something beautiful two miles away and two hundred feet up, and there was an entrancing half-smile on her face. Her hair was long and black and it turned under just about where her straight back started to make her waist so slim; I'd never seen hair like that, but there was something about the strong, clean curve of her jaw and the way the inside corners of her eyes were lower than they should be—

"Stop!" I screamed to the cabby. He must have thought that I was about to have some kind of an attack. He was wrong, then. I had already had the attack but it had just now hit me. Anyway, he did a dollar and a half's worth of damage to his brake linings, took the dollar I threw at him as I dived out, and went his unprofitable way.

I ran to her, caught her elbow. "Hey! I—"

"Ah," she contraltoed. "My friend the Juggernaut."



"Amend that," I said quickly. "Your very dear friend Eddie Gretchen."

"Oh?" said her eyebrows, and she said, "And when and where did Eddie Gretchen become my very dear friend?"

"Damfino," I said, and we began walking. By glancing at me without turning her head, she conveyed the general idea that we were walking the same way but not together. "That's for you to figure out," I went on, "and in all sincerity I wish you would. I know you. I used to circulate around you like a bloodstream. But I honestly can't remember when it happened. You're a dream that got broken up by an alarm clock. Come on now—you have my face and you have my name. What do they mean to you?"

"I was never married to you," she said distantly. "So I haven't your name. And I don't want your face."

"With a face like yours," I said, "I can't blame—"

She actually smiled at me. "You haven't changed a bit, Eddie."

I glowed for a second and then realized that she didn't intend to help any. "All right—when was it?"

"The year Covina High beat your Filthy Five 48 to 17."

"It was 48 to 19," I said furiously, "And they were always

known as the Fighting Five."

"They were filthy," she said, and laughed richly.

"Fighting," I growled. "And besides, the referees—hey! You're not Underhanded Mazie?"

"I am not! No one knows me well enough to call me that! I'm Maria Undergaard—*Miss* Undergaard to you, Mr. Gretchen."

"Aha! Er—Mazie, m'love, what was it they called the team?"

"The Fighting Five," she acknowledged.

"Okay, Maria." I took her arm happily.

"But they were filthy," she muttered. I let it go at that.

We found a table off the avenue on which to hook our elbows and gab. I don't think I took my eyes from her once in three hours. It was unbelievable. When I had first met her, she'd been a refugee from one of the low countries, in this country about four years. She had, then, an utterly charming clipped accent, which was now replaced by beautifully schooled diction—the pluperfect English achieved only by those who have thoroughly learned it as a strange language. Ah, she'd been a killer-diller in her school days. She'd always had an odd seriousness about her, a deep and unwavering intensity; and my strongest memory of her was the sleepless night I spent after our first—and only—date. It was all wonderment. I wondered what a



girl like that would ever develop into. I wondered how in blue hell she had kept me at a respectable distance all evening without using her hands. And most of all I wondered at the overwhelming sense of satisfaction I had got out of it. I never spoiled that satisfaction by asking for another date—it was too complete. For the kind of wild Indian I used to be, that was quite something. And now here she was, telling me how she had inherited a little money after she graduated, had spent four years at a small college up on the Lakes, and had been studying herself myopic ever since.

“Studying what?”

She looked at me oddly. “Spiritism. Psychic manifestations. Possession, more than anything else. I’ve read a million books and barked up a million wrong trees, but I—think I proved what I thought all along.”

“What?”

“That possession is an established fact. That anyone can be possessed. That I myself can be possessed.”

“I’d like to be sure of that,” I said. She took it the nice way, though her eyes told me that she hadn’t missed anything. “Psychic possession is a very strange thing. But it is not strange in the way you might think. I’m sure you’ve read stories—books, articles—about it. How spirits

drift about in and among us, how, as elementals and familiars, they sometimes take possession, causing us to do things completely alien to ourselves. Well, it isn’t like that at all. It isn’t psychic—it’s psychological. I have proof of that.” As she spoke her eyes began to wander and her voice to fade and come in strong with her wavering gaze. She seemed to be struggling desperately to keep her attention on what she was saying; but it seemed as if she were being distracted by some conversation inaudible to me. “Did you know that a vibrating string never gives off the fullest tone unless it has a sounding board back of it? The ‘spirit’ that possesses people is like that. My vibrating string in the analogy is the source of that spirit—a mind emanating suspicion. The sounding board is—” She broke off, looking over her shoulder at the woman who sat alone at the next table. I’d noticed her before, because of the remarkable viciousness of her expression, and the brittle politeness of the man who had sat there with her. They seemed to be a little bit married and finding it quite a strain. Maria half rose, glanced at me, and with an effort she sat down again.

“What’s the matter—don’t you feel well?” I asked.

“Oh no—no, I’m perfectly all

—I was just. . .” She sipped at her drink, glanced over her shoulder again, took a deep breath, smiled at me.

“Someone you know?” I queried.

She shook her head. “Where was I?”

“You were here with me, looking very lovely, and you had just told me that the possessing spirit is in reality an emanation of suspicion.”

“Oh. Well, it has its sounding board in a mind which bears a guilty conscience. Suspicion and guilt; when the two of them combine, they form a very powerful psychological entity, which is actually the thing which possesses a mind opened to it.”

“Sounds very involved and not overly important to me,” I said, scratching my ear. “Now that you’ve got it, what’s it get you?”

She shrugged. “What good is any knowledge, once achieved? Maybe someday someone cleverer than I will find out how to use what I have learned. As far as I’m concerned, I’ve learned all I—care to about it.” She looked at me; there was something behind that statement and the poignant glance that went with it. She was smooth, svelte; the most equable and poised human being I had ever seen; and yet under that knee-action armor she wore was a pleading, little-girl kind of terror at something she

couldn’t understand. It didn’t fit. It didn’t make sense. It made me frightened, too, a little, and hugely anxious to share it with her, whatever it was. No matter *what it was!*

She giggled suddenly. I said “Huh?”

“I just thought of something, Eddie. You were in an awful rush when you swept me off my feet on the Avenue. Whatever became of that appointment you had to keep?”

“Oh, that. Well, I—*holy smoke!*” I leaped up, a horrible picture of Sylvia sitting in a restaurant for three hours, waiting for me, wafted through my mind. I excused myself to Maria’s laughing face and hightailed for a phone. Halfway there it occurred to me that Maria had come out with her little reminder with peculiar suddenness. One phone booth was occupied, I noticed, by the frozen-faced gentleman lately from the table next to ours. He was ogling into the phone with a real genuine sugar-candy ogle. I hate guys like that. I slid into the next booth, dialed. While I was waiting for my connection I glanced back at my table. Maria wasn’t there. I froze. This was dandy. Call up one babe to fix a stand-up while another was doing precisely the same thing to me.

I got helloed at through the receiver and asked to have Syl-

via paged. Sitting back to wait, I looked out again. I'd been wrong. Maria hadn't gone, she was over at the next table, talking earnestly to the basilisk who sat there. I felt my eyebrows go up. What did she mean by lying to me about not knowing those people? And why lie about it?

I could see even at that distance how the woman's face was lowering and setting as Maria spoke swiftly in her ear. When her countenance had achieved the general lines of the bulbous bow on a battleship, she got up and started over toward the phones. I had an impulse to pop into the next booth and warn the man in there that she was coming, but I didn't want to miss my call. Just as she reached the booths and plastered her ear against the glass, I heard Sylvia's voice in my receiver.

"Hello?"

"Sylvia? This is Eddie Gretchen."

"Ah. Eddie Gretchen. I wish I didn't know you well enough to remember your name. Where have you been? Where are you?"

"It was this way," I said gently. "An old friend of mine is in trouble. I just had to lend a hand—couldn't help myself." That's true enough, I thought, and anyway, she's not listening to me.

"Too bad," she said bitterly.

"Meanwhile I've waited for two and a half hours in a restaurant where I'm not known, in which I have eaten a substantial lunch and from which I have secured a pack of expensive cigarettes, and to which I have brought no money. I am to assume that you will not be here?"

"Oh, Sylvia, I can't possibly. About the check, put the manager on. He knows me. I can fix that. And Sylvia—I'm terribly sorry. I—" but she had put down the receiver. In a moment the manager's voice came over I explained the situation, got his okay, and asked for Sylvia.

"I'm sorry," said the manager. "The lady seemed—well, miffed. Definitely miffed. She said to tell you not to hold your finger down your throat until you hear from her again, because you'll sure digest it off. Heh heh."

"Heh heh," I mimicked, and hung up. I stepped out of the booth into the messiest piece of publicized domesticity I had ever seen. It was the woman Maria had spoken to. She was just in the act of bursting into the next booth. Piling in practically on top of the hapless man inside, she gave vent to her emotions in a screaming falsetto.

"You moth-eaten old Billygoat! How dare you leave me sitting alone in a fourth-rate dive while you call up that sleazy little tramp? Take your hand away from

the mouthpiece, you crumb. Let her hear me. Here—get away. (Into the phone.) Listen, you homewrecker. If you want my filthy husband you can have him. But you just better think it over. If you want his money, he hasn't any. I haven't had a new dress in six months, although I'll bet you have, you—ah, she hung up." She banged the receiver violently onto its hook and turned to her palsied spouse. "Things have come to a pretty pass," she shrieked, "When total strangers can walk up to me and tell me about your goings-on! You—"

Along about then she began to repeat herself, and my interest dwindled. I pushed my way through the crowd that had collected, and went back to Maria. She sat with her head bowed, and I really don't think she knew I had returned until I was seated and spoke to her.

"Maria—"

"Oh! Eddie—" with a bright, phony smile, "did you get it fixed up all right?"

"Yeh." I sat looking at her somberly. "You did, too."

"What?" all innocence.

"Fixed something up all right. I hate to pry, Marie, but you just caused a hell of a stink over there. What was the idea of tipping that woman off that her husband was daddying some sugar over the phone? How did you know what he was up to in

the first place? And why the devil did you tell me you didn't know those people?"

She was a little panicked. Her eyes went wide, and she reached over and clutched my wrist. She didn't know it, but her touch on my arm clinched any argument, forever and ever. As long as she held me that way, looked at me that way, she was right; I was wrong. "Please don't be angry, Eddie. I hoped you hadn't noticed. No, I didn't lie to you. I never saw them before. How did I know what was going on? I just—knew, Eddie. Please believe me—please don't catechize me! Will you forget it—just this once? I'll try not to let it happen again! Truly I will, Eddie."

I tried to grin those bright tear-stars out of her eyes. I put one fist under her chin, punched it gently, shaking my head. "Sure, Maria. Sure. Heck—it was nothing. Skip it."

Why I hadn't sense enough to tie the incident up with her theory of possession, I'll never know.

The fourth time I saw her I proposed. That was three hours after the third time, which was one day after the second time, which was five solid weeks after the first time. Yes, it took five weeks for me to persuade her to entrust herself to me for an evening after that occasion in the little bar off the Avenue. Twice

she almost cried over the phone, and after that she laughed it off: and when she had run out of reasons for not seeing me she broke down and confessed that it was because she was afraid she would embarrass me the same way again. I had to tell her that in the first place I hadn't been embarrassed and in the second place I didn't give a damn about its happening again; I just wanted to see her. It wasn't until I threatened to walk out of a window at the studio that she finally made that second date. Eighty-seven floors is a long way, and I meant what I said.

She always insisted on going to places where we'd be more or less alone, whether it was in a hansom cab in Central Park or a walk over the Brooklyn Bridge. That suited me so well I didn't bother to wonder about it. But she'd go to any lengths to avoid being with me and strangers at the same time. So it was there in the park, at four o'clock in the afternoon on the day I'd rolled out of bed early to take her to lunch, that I proposed. It was easy. I just held both her hands and felt afraid to look into her eyes when I said,

"Hey. We got to get married."

And she smiled her very own smile and nodded. I kissed her. When a passing cop grinningly broke it up, she straightened her hat, patted the back of my hand

and shook her head. "I wouldn't marry you, Eddie," she said quietly. My blood turned to salt water and began to ooze coldly out of my pores. I didn't have to ask her to say it again because she did. Then she stood up. "Let's get out of here, Eddie." One of my arms went up and yanked her back down on the bench. I stared woodenly at some kids who were feeding the ducks down on the lake.

"For a minute I was scared," I said. My voice hurt me. "I thought you said you wouldn't marry me."

"I did, Eddie."

"Yeah." I turned to her and when she saw my face she lifted her hands a little and shrank back. "Why?" I asked. "Single, aren't you?"

She nodded. "It's something that—Eddie, will you take my word for it—just this once?"

"No," I said, "I already took your word for something 'just this once.' Spill it."

"It's—about the things I studied. I spent a month or so by myself up in the mountains not long ago—did I tell you? I didn't see a soul for forty-two days. I was always susceptible to what has been called the psychic. Up there, I studied, and I tried out a lot of things, and experimented a lot. That was when I got on the right track. About possession, I mean. I found out

how to open my mind to possession. I went too far. I held it open too long. It—grew that way. I can't close it. I'm a permanent susceptible, Eddie. When I came down from the mountains I was different. I always will be."

"What the hell's this all about?" I snarled. "Do you love me?"

"You don't have to ask me that," she whispered. I looked at her. I didn't have to ask her. I put my arms around her and said, with my teeth on the lobe of her ear. "Tell the rest of that nonsense to your husband on your honeymoon."

The cop came along again. I thumbed at the lake over my shoulder and told him to go jump in it. He went away laughing.

Different she might have been, but her only difference was in being better, finer, sweeter than any other woman on earth. That's what I believed after our honeymoon. I believe it now, with an amendment. Then, I thought that what I just said covered everything. Since, I learned a little more. Maria did have a profound difference from other women.

It didn't show up until we came back to the city and I got back on the air again. I had a nice stretch, and she adjusted herself to it gracefully. I m.c.'d an all-night radio program from two to seven in the morning,

which meant getting up around four and breakfasting at supper-time. Great stuff. That way you're fresh and ready to go in the evening when everyone else who has to work for a living is tired out from a day's work. Before I got married I had a thousand friends and a thousand places to go every night. Afterward, I couldn't see why Maria shouldn't go to at least five hundred of them with me. She didn't like the idea. Acted afraid of it. I kidded her and swore at her and annoyed her and persuaded her. "A guy like me has to have friends," I said. "Look. My program has sponsors. As long as people wire in requests for phonograph records, the sponsors know that if they're hearing the music they can't very well avoid the plugs. They renew their contracts and that's what gives me nickels and dimes to buy you ice-cream cones and automobiles and stuff. You'd be surprised how many people wire in from bars and restaurants, whether they know me personally or not, just because they saw me there during the evening. I got to get around. I can notice the slack-off already, when I've only been off the stem for a couple of weeks. Last night I played fifty-eight minutes of records and transcriptions without getting a single wire. That isn't good, babe."

And she kept saying, "Then go, Eddie. I'll be all right. I won't run away from you if you leave me alone for a few hours. Go see your friends." So I did. But it didn't work out. Those weren't stag parties I was going to. The babes all knew I was married, and when they saw me by myself all the time they got the wrong idea. A little bit of this, and I went home one night and laid down the law.

She didn't like it, but she didn't argue. She took an unconscionably long time to put on her face, but she came without a peep. I didn't expect that meekness. I told her so. She smiled without enthusiasm.

"I've asked you not to force me to come with you," she said sadly. "I guess you've just got to find out for yourself."

We started on West Fifty-second street and did it up pretty well. The evening netted us four dinner invitations, three pairs of tickets to shows on the stem, and a total of ninety-two telegrams on that night's program. Maria did me proud. There wasn't a lovelier or more charming woman under lights that night, and after the first half hour or so she seemed to be enjoying it. When I tossed her into a cab in front of the studio at one-thirty, she grinned and squeezed my hand. "Maybe I was wrong, Eddie. I hope so anyway. But it was

swell. I really enjoyed myself."

I went on up to the studio, feeling all warm inside, and it wasn't the highballs either. Jakie Feltner was winding up the "Hits at Home" stretch, two hours of records of bands playing currently in New York spots, with a background of transcribed night-club chatter to make the unwary listener think he was listening to the real thing. He gave me a peculiar look through the plate-glass as I went in, waved his hand toward my table. I threaded my way through the record-stacks and picked up the sheaf of early wires that fed out of the teletype by my microphone. As a favor to me, Jakie used to read off the one-thirty to two wires and stack up the first few releases for me while his own were being played. I gathered that he had come across a wire of particular moment. He had. Among the run-of-the-mill requests was this little gem, marked "Personal":

HEY EDDIE BETTER KEEP THAT SHEMALE SHERLOCK YOU MARRIED OUT OF POWDER ROOMS OR SHE'LL WIND UP MINUS AN EYE. SHE WENT OVER FIVE WOMEN IN THERE ONE AFTER ANOTHER, TOLD EACH ONE EXACTLY WHAT SHE WANTED TO KNOW. TOLD MY WIFE ABOUT THE RAISE I GOT TWO MONTHS AGO. I



GOT TROUBLE SON. YOU  
LEAVE HER HOME NEXT  
TIME.

DUKE FROM DUBUQUE.

I read it over three times. The Duke was one of my steadies, who apparently went on a telegram binge every payday. I've seen him send twenty-eight in two hours. I never did find out who he was, though he apparently saw me very often.

"Pretty, huh?" said Jakie, closing the soundproof door into the other section and coming over to me.

"Yeah," I said. "The guy's nuts." He looked over my shoulder at the Duke's wire. "Oh—that one. Could be. Maybe all these are nuts too." He riffled through the pile, tossed out three more wires.

DEAR EDDIE THERE CAME  
THE BRIDE AND THERE WENT  
THE DETAILS OF MY MONKEY-  
BUSINESS TO THE WAITING  
EARS OF THE WORLD. IF YOU  
CAN'T AFFORD A MUZZLE I'LL  
SEND YOU ONE. PLEASE PLAY  
"I'LL BE GLAD WHEN YOU'RE  
DEAD" AND DEDICATE IT TO  
YOUR WIFE.

A FRIEND.

HI EDDIE SAW THE NEW  
MATA HARI ON FIFTY-SECOND  
STREET AND WAS TOLD SHE  
BELONGS TO YOU. WHO'D OF

THOUGHT YOU'D WED A PUB-  
LIC ENEMY? PLEASE PLAY  
"WHISPERING GRASS."

ANNONYMOUS.

EDDIE: DIDN'T HAVE A  
CHANCE TO TELL YOU AT THE  
TIME BUT I WISH YOU'D KEEP  
WHAT I TELL YOU UNDER  
YOUR HAT. YOUR WIFE TOLD  
BERGEN ABOUT MY MERGER  
WITH WILLIAMSON WHICH  
WAS DUE TOMORROW. THAT  
WILL COST ME ABOUT EIGHT  
THOUSAND. GUESS IT WASN'T  
MARIA'S FAULT BUT YOU  
SHOULD HAVE TOLD HER TO  
KEEP QUIET ABOUT IT.

HARRY ELLIOTT.

They were all lousy but the last one hurt the most. Harry had been a friend of mine for years. Maria and I had joined his crowd a couple of hours ago at Dave's place. Bergen and his wife were there. Bergen was Harry's A-number-one rival and competitor in the printing business. I'd known for quite some time that Harry had a deal coming up with the Williamson concern that would give him weight enough to drive Bergen underground. I gathered that now that the info had leaked out through Maria, Bergen had managed to bear down on Williamson to kill the merger. That was bad enough in itself; but imagine how I felt when I remembered

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that *I had positively not told Maria one word about Harry Elliott's affairs!*

Jakie said quietly, "Sorry, Eddie."

I looked at him. I felt my jaw flapping foolishly and waved him away. "Go back to your turntables, Jakie. You're on the air—remember?"

"Yeh." He went to the door, turned to give me a long look, and then dashed for the mike as his number played itself out. Jakie was swell. He'd do anything for me, I knew, but there was nothing he could do about this.

How could Maria have done these things? If she had *why* did she? I could easily see how. Anyone who goes clubbing with me has to spend a lot of time by himself, because I know so damn many people. I'm always hopping from one table to another. While I was making the rounds, I guess Maria had been getting in her work.

"That—stinks," I said.

Long practice had taught me how to maintain a free-and-easy mike style no matter how I felt, no matter how much good luck or bad had piled into me before the show. Jakie put my theme on the table and the red light in front of me flashed on. I sat back mulling over the whole dirty business, and when the last chorus of my theme faded, I

grabbed the mike around the neck and went to work.

"Top o' the wee sma' to ye, boys and gals. This is the man behind the mike who makes all that talking noise between the music—Eddie Gretchen's the name. We're open for business till the sun comes up and stops us, and if there's any ol' thing you want to hear over the air, drop me a wire and tell me about it. Don't call me up because I haven't the intelligence to use a phone. Before I play you some transcriptions and stuff there's a little something on my mind, viz. and to wit: There's no law yet in this country against sending me personal wires while I'm working. It's fun for you and fun for me. But there's nothing funny about hitting below the belt. I just got a sheaf of that kind of thing and I don't feel so happy about it, boys and gals. I'm not saying to quit sending them, though. Oh no. But when you do, sign your names and addresses. If I find out that the information is phony, I might like to drop around and personally cave in some faces. Think it over while Tony Reddik's swell little band shows you and you how drums are really kicked around in 'Suit-case Shuffle.' " I spun the platter and let it go.

Well, it brought results. During the show I got fourteen more

wires of that sort. I think all of that powder room crowd were represented. Some of them were funny and some of them were nasty and some were just hurt about it. I got my names and addresses too. Nine of them were women. It certainly seemed as if Maria had done the most vicious piece of blabbing I'd ever heard of. She told husbands about their wives and wives about their best friends. She broke up business deals and caused fistfights and broke up more than one otherwise happy couple. I couldn't understand where she got all her information, or what on earth possessed—possessed...the word did something to my brain. That was the thing she was always trying to tell me about. The reason she didn't want to mix with a crowd. I'd seen loose-tongued women before, but this particular woman—damn it! She was so restrained! Her every thought and movement was so perfectly controlled! Well, I thought sourly, she's going to have her chance to explain it all tonight. Every dirty lousy little bit of it.

She was asleep when I came in. I stood over her, wanting to kiss her, wanting to punch her lovely mouth, wanting to kick her teeth in, wanting to have her put her arms around me so I could cry on her shoulder. She must have sensed me

near her. She put up her arms and smiled without opening her eyes. I took the telegrams out of my breast pocket and closed her fingers on them. Without a word I went into the bathroom and shut the door. As I peeled off my clothes and got into pajamas and a robe I heard her start to cry, and then be quiet again. When I went back she was lying with her face buried in the crumpled telegrams.

"I see you beat me to it," I said evenly. She turned her head ever so slightly, so that one dark eye regarded me piteously. "What do you mean?"

"Why, I was going to rub your nose in those wires myself."

She rolled over and sat up. Her face was scared and defiant, and not terribly apologetic. I hadn't expected any of that except the fear. "Don't say I didn't warn you," she said softly. "Don't say I didn't try and try to keep you from taking me to those places. Don't say I didn't try to tell you about it even before we were married."

"My mistake for shutting you up. Go on—you have the floor."

"What do you expect me to say? I'm sorry?"

"Babe, that doesn't begin to cover it." I went over to her. My gums hurt, the way my jaw was clenched, driving the teeth into them. "I want the whole story. I want to know why you

are such a lousy little blabbermouth, and how you got the dirt you threw around all night."

"Sit down," she said coolly, "or you'll get a seizure and fall down."

Her eyes were very wide, and that dark something in them that had chilled me on the day we met was there. I crossed the room and sat. She began to talk in a low voice.

"I was possessed last night, Eddie. Not once, but time and time again. Oh, you're so stupid sometimes! I knew this was going to happen—I knew it, but you had to be so bullheaded and—oh, I can't blame it on you, except for not trying to understand. I'll try once more. You can take it or leave it, Eddie. I've known this was coming; I know just what to say. Funny, isn't it?

"Remember what I told you about the entity that is conceived of suspicion and born of guilt? It's a wicked little *poltergeist*—an almost solid embodiment of hate. And I'm susceptible. Eddie, I can't be in the same room with any two people who bear suspicion and the corresponding sense of guilt! And the world is full of those people—you can't avoid them. Everyone has dozens upon dozens of petty hates and prejudices. Let me give you an example. Suppose you have a racial hatred of, say, Ti-

betans. You and I are sitting here, and a Tibetan walks in. Now, you know him. He has a very find mind, or he has done you a favor, or he is a friend of a good friend of yours. You talk for a half hour, politely, and everything's all right. In your heart, though, you're saying, 'I hate your yellow hide, your snivelling filth.' Everything will still be all right as long as he is unconscious of it. But once let this thought flicker into his mind—'He dislikes me because of my race'—and then and there the *poltergeist* is born. The room is full of it, charged with it. It has body and power of its own, completely independent of you or the Tibetan. I am a susceptible. The entity approaches me. I try to avoid it. I make bright remarks. I move around the room, busy myself with some flowers, a book, anything, but it's no use. I can't escape it. I can't fight it away or close my ego to it. Suddenly it has me, completely. I am part of it. It directs me, drives me. Its whole purpose is one of hate. It wants to drag your dislike and his suspicion into the light. I am its instrument now. My control is only strong enough to temper the words that burn at my lips. So instead of screaming out 'He hates you, because he hates all of your yellow kind!' I move closer to the man. I

stop near him, and say out of the corner of my mouth, 'You'd better go soon. He doesn't like Tibetans and I don't know how long he can keep on being polite.' Once it's said, the *poltergeist* is nullified. The hatred between you is open, no longer secret, and secret hate is the very essence of a *poltergeist* it dissipates, and I am free; but the damage is done. The most I can do is to apologize, make a joke of it, say I was trying to be funny. I won't be believed, because my statement, rotten as it was, was true in its very essence and can't be denied. But if I should be believed in my apology, then the seeds of hatred and suspicion are left, and the entity is conceived all over again, and possession takes place once more, then and there. To be spared that, I never deny what I have said, and never apologize for it. It would only make it worse.

That's how it happens, Eddie, and it can't be changed. I was always susceptible, and I made the condition permanent and acute by my experiments when I was alone in the mountains. I can't change, Eddie. I shouldn't have married you, shouldn't have done this to you. I—guess this is the wind-up. I'll get out." She tried a weak little laugh. "Good thing we haven't been married long enough to have collected

a house and a mess of furniture, eh?"

"Yeh," I said. I watched her as she got up, slipped into a house-coat, and began to pack. She moved swiftly about the place, collecting the little odds and ends that I had just been learning to expect in my apartment. It had taken some learning, too. Bachelor digs sure get made over when a woman comes into them. After a while I went over and got into the bed. It was still a little warm and smelled nice. I turned my face to the wall, and in a minute I heard her thump a suitcase down beside the others in the middle of the room. She was looking at me; I could feel her eyes on the nape of my neck. I knew she was dressed for the street, all ready to go.

"Maria. . ."

"Yes, Eddie?" She answered a little too quickly to hide the fact that she wasn't as collected as she hoped.

"Wake me up around four, will you? We'll eat us some scrambled eggs and then take that spin around the park like we did when we were single."

There was a thump when she dropped her handbag, and then she was all over me. I put my arms around her and held her until she gasped for breath, and then I grinned at her and got me some sleep.

After that I did my clubbing solo and let Maria build me a home. She loved it. If she missed not seeing people, she didn't complain. I guess she got used to it after a while; I know I did. Things went along beautifully until Ivor Jones, the station manager, called Jackie Feltner and me into his office one evening. Neither of us knew what was up, but we both had guesses.

Jones pursed his lips and took off his glasses as we came in. He was a dried-up little man, a stickler for detail but a pretty good man to work for. He told us to sit, handed cigarettes around.

"Boys, I want you to help me. I don't have to tell you how the station is making out. I think we all are satisfied with it, but you know and I know that a small independent broadcasting station can't make as much or pay as much as a big network outlet. Now, one of the network stations here is shutting down. It needs complete new equipment, and the corporation wouldn't mind doing it. But since there are too many stations here already, and since we are equipped up to the hilt with all the latest, I rather think they'd like to take us over. They'd boost our power ten thousand watts. We'd run all their releases and therefore share in their income. You boys, as staff

announcers, stand to get a twenty percent raise. How's it sound?"

"Swell," said Jackie. I nodded.

"I'm sold on it," said Jones. "If we could get Shanaman, the general manager of the Eastern Network, to feel the same way, we could come to terms. I've done all I could think of in a business way. But it'll take a little more than that. If I can mellow the old boy down a bit with a swell dinner party, I might get him to sign the papers then and there. I want you two to come and bring your women. It'll be next Friday night. Shanaman's bringing his wife. My house. You'll be there?"

"Formal?" asked Jackie. Jones nodded.

"I'd rather not, Mr. Jones," I said. "I sort of had an engagement—"

"Break it," Jones said. "Shanaman's interested in meeting you. As a matter of fact, your show is a high-spot, a real selling point for the station. You've got to come. And bring that new wife of yours. I want to meet her."

Jackie laughed and got up, slapping me on the back. "I'll persuade him, Mr. Jones. We'll be there, don't worry." He was a big fellow, that Feltner. He had me rushed out of there before I knew what went on. Cornering me in the corridor, he said, "Come on Eddie—be a sport. Don't queer that party. It

means a lot to me. Claire—my wife—has been acting a little peculiar lately and that party ought to fix the trouble. No kidding, Eddie—you've got to do it."

"I'll see what Maria says," I muttered, and headed home.

Maria said she didn't like the idea. We had a long argument about it. I pointed out that it was formal, that it was a business affair, that the eight people who were there knew each other very little and had nothing but the broadest interests in common, and that anyway I couldn't avoid it. It was orders. I also mentioned the fact that Jake wanted me to do it, and I was a good friend of his. Maria's arguments were all old stuff to me, but for one new one. She was afraid that she wouldn't be able to stand it. When she had been in more or less constant contact with people, she was conditioned to the influx of possessions. Now it was different. She feared it. It was months since she had been through it; she was afraid of what it might do her. But I had my way, and Friday night found us walking into Jones's place in Queens Village.

It was quite a layout. Jones had a nice income and used it. Big house, big rooms, big butler. We were the last to arrive. We got rid of our coats and were shown into the library, where

cocktails were being served. I stopped at the door and looked around the room. Over in a corner Jones was talking to a stout old apple who seemed all jowls and boiled shirt. Shanaman, I surmised. Talking disinterestedly with Jones's slightly washed-out wife was Claire Feltner. I knew her well; she hung around the studio a lot. A nasty thought occurred to me; I'd noticed Claire there many a time when Jakie was out. Jones always seemed to be around at the time. I began to see why Jakie had been so anxious to bring Claire and Jones into the same room. He wanted to watch them. That was bad.

I rescued Jakie from the voluminous feminine counterpart of Shanaman. The network manager's wife had poor Feltner in a corner and was pounding his ear frighteningly with an account of her husband's metabolism.

Introductions were made all around, and I left Maria with Jakie while I joined Jones and Shanaman. The talk was general and too loud. Just about then I began to wish I hadn't come. That went on all the time I was there. I disliked particularly this business of our being in that big room, free to wander from person to person for Lord knows how long until dinner was served. In a matter of minutes Maria could stumble across one of her



little *poltergeists*, and then—well, in a matter of minutes Maria did.

Shanaman was building up to a terrific climax, in an unfunny story when I saw Maria, across the room from me, looking from Shanaman to Mrs. Jones and back again. There was something about her stance, her eyes, that told me she was fighting the thing. I broke away from Shanaman as fast as I could. Not fast enough. Maria got to Mrs. Jones before I did, sat down beside her, began talking swiftly. As I got there, Mrs. Jones rose, glaring at Shanaman, and went over to her husband.

"What goes on?" I asked anxiously.

"Oh, Eddie, it happened again." She would have cried if I hadn't caught her hands, squeezed them until they hurt. "Shanaman plans to put a network crew in your station if he takes it over. Everyone will lose his job, except you, Eddie!"

"And you told that to Mrs. Jones?"

"Yes—don't you see? She suspected it, and Shanaman knew he was going to do it! I couldn't help myself, Eddie!"

"That's all right, Kid." I whispered. "No hair off our necks." I watched the Joneses. It seemed to me that he didn't believe his wife. She was evidently furious with him for his stupidity and

said so into his ear. He turned his back on her and went to Claire Feltner. She went over to see if she couldn't pump some information out of Shanaman. Jakie stood near them, glumly watching his wife puckering up to Jones.

"Try to keep away from Jakie," I said, turning back to Maria. But she had slipped away when I was looking at Jones. She was standing by the window behind me, kneading her hands and staring out into the night. I figured it was best to leave her alone as long as she could stand it. Meanwhile, I was going to try to keep the rest of them away from her. I barged in on Shanaman's conversation with Mrs. Jones. It was short and sweet. She was just winding up what must have been quite a scintillating piece of vituperation.

"—and don't think I don't know what you're up to, you old wolf," she was saying. She was hopping mad. Shanaman looked bewilderingly indignant. It was too late to do anything about it.

"My dear lady," he said pompously, "I regret exceedingly that your suspicions should have reached such a state. Ah—Mr. Jones. Will you come here a minute?" Jones looked up, saw what was happening, came rabbiting over. I saw the studio deal flitting out the window when I saw Jones reach out and clip

his wife across the mouth. Shanaman held up his hands in horror, then barged across the room to his wife.

Then everything happened at once. Maria popped up from nowhere, nudged Jakie Feltner, whispered in his ear, nodded toward Claire. Jakie roared, reached out, spun Jones around and smeared him with a terrific right hook. Shanaman, fear of publicity plastered all over his fat face, bolted for the door with his wife.

And that was the wind-up of Jones's precious little dinner party. Maria filled in the details for me on the way home. It seemed that Jones had been seeing a great deal of Jakie's wife, and wondered how far it had gone. Maria, possessed, told him, and he punched Jones's mouth. Mrs. Jones's hysterical calling of Shanaman's bluff sprang, I imagine, from jealousy and the desire to hurt Jones. It was an unholy mess, one of those awful things that are awful when they happen and funny afterward. Except for one thing. Jones didn't get up after Jakie knocked him down. He smashed his silly brains out on the brass andiron in the fireplace.

The rest of it was rough. When the trial was over and poor old Feltner got sent up for thirty years on a second-degree murder charge, there wasn't much left

for me. Unfavorable publicity pulled a lot of advertising contracts, and anyway, as I said, there are too many radio stations in this town. But the notoriety hadn't finished with me when it took my living away from me. Eddie Gretchen turned out to be the guy with a thousand friends who never heard of him. The radio game was strictly on the receiving end, for me. Old Shanaman's bolting for the door the night of the murder hadn't done him a bit of good; he was subpoenaed and put on the grill with the rest of us. I hadn't liked the way he cried about it—after all, big shots and little, we were all in the same boat—and he got even with me by passing the word around the studios that I wasn't to get so much as an audition. That, after seven years in radio! Yeah, it was rough. I'd always had money and I didn't know how to go about being poor. I learned. Maria had a couple of grand in the cooler but that went quickly, along with what I'd saved, which wasn't a hell of a lot. I hit the jolly old rock-ribbed bottom the day I tried to get a job as a studio page and got well treated until somebody remembered me and I got handed the rush. The smell even reached into publishing houses, and the feature articles I used to sell brought checks every six months instead

of every two weeks. I sold a little stuff under a phony name; but for that Maria and I would have starved. We lost our place and our furniture and the car. Bad. But I couldn't lose Maria. She almost left me right after the trial, feeling herself guilty of Jones's murder. I talked her out of that, telling her that he had it coming to him anyway; and then she got morbid and turned on the gas one day. I got there in time, and the police emergency squad brought her around. After that she buckled down like the ace she was, and tried helping instead of hindering. God, when I think of her down on her four bones scrubbing floors, and rubbing her white hands raw on my shirts, I know what they mean when they say "For richer, for poorer" . . .

I stood out on the sidewalk in front of the radio playhouse and shivered because I had sold my overcoat six weeks before. There was nowhere else to turn to, and I hadn't the gall to go back to Maria so early in the day. Up-town, downtown, crosstown—all the same to me.

A man walked up, looked me over, handed me a slip of paper. It said. 'Could you tell me how to get to South Ferry from here?'

I said, "Sure. Take the Seventh Avenue subway—"

He shook his head, pointed to

an ear. Deaf. I took the pencil he offered, wrote down the directions. He tipped his hat, went his way. I remember wondering how a guy like that got such a nice warm coat. Some agency, I guessed. I got all my faculties and no overcoat. He's a deaf mute and has an overcoat. I'll take the overcoat.

Then the great idea hit me. I smacked my hands together, whooped like a drunken Indian, and headed at a dead run for the West Side, where Maria was trying to make a home for me out of an eleven-a-month cold water falt. I reached it, flung myself up three flights of stairs, fell gasping and moaning for breath inside the room. Maria didn't know what to make of it, and figured even less when I got wind enough to explain. If she was possessed, I wanted to know, could she keep from tipping anybody off about it *if she wrote the information down?*

"I don't know, Eddie. I never tried it."

"Well, try it, damn it. Try it!"

"H-how?"

I glanced at the ninety-eight cent alarm clock on the stove. "Come on, babe. Get your coat on. We're going to get some money."

She was used to me by this time or she never would have done it. I didn't tell her until we reached the pawn-shop that

the money was coming from the one thing of value she'd hung onto—the star sapphire I'd given her as an engagement ring the day before we got married. Under the three golden spheres I relieved her of it, shoved an old envelope and a stub of pencil into her hands, and dragged her in.

I knew the broker well by that time. The only Irishman I'd ever seen in a hockshop. "Terry, me lad," I shouted. "I'm about to do you a favor. Hock me this ring for eighty bucks and you can't lose a thing." I gave it to him. He grunted sourly. Maria started forward, about to speak. I shoved her toward a trunk, pointed at the paper and pencil. She grinned and began to write.

"I'll give ye ten," said Terence.

"And I'll take me pathronage ilsewhere," I mocked him.

"Twenty, an' ye're a young thief."

"Sivinty-foive, ye grave-rober."

"Twenty-two an' a half, and be dommed to ye. It's white gold, not platinum."

"Platinum's twenty bucks an ounce on the open market, you pernicious old Gael, and gold's thirty-five. Don't blind me with your jeweler's tricks."

And still not an interruption from Maria.

Terence looked at the ring carefully through his glass.

"Thirty dollars."

"Will you make that thirty-two fifty?"

"I will that, and there I'm done."

"You're a good business man, Terence, and I'll treat you right. You just went up ten dollars and I can afford to come down ten. That's meeting you halfway at sixty-five dollars."

Maria's pencil scribbled busily.

"Fifty dollars to get yez out o' my store," said the broker with a great effort.

"Fifty-seven fifty."

We settled at fifty-five; I signed the book and we left. As soon as we were outside I snatched the envelope. Maria had written no less than twelve times. "Don't be a fool. He only paid sixty for it when it was new."

I kissed her then and there. "It works," I breathed. "It works!"

She looked at the envelope. "The truth will out," she grinned. "But Eddie—I didn't want to pawn that ring. I—"

"You dry up and leave it to me, pal," I said. "Come home—I want you to dig up that dress of yours—you know, the black-brown one with the truffles on it."

"Ruffles," she said. "You eat truffles, but it's an evening gown, Eddie. Where—"

"—are we going? West five-two street, babe, and we're going

to scabble up all the dirt from the gutter to gutter." I stopped in front of a "Tuxedos to Hire" joint. "I'm going in here. You beat it home and pretty up."

She did, under protest. I got myself a fair enough dinner jacket, and brought it home. In two hours we looked like a million. I tucked the thin little roll into my pocket, and we started. We took the subway to Fiftieth and caught a cab there to go to Fifty-second. A thirty-cent cab ride looks just as good as a three dollar one at the far end of the line. I carried a battery of sharp pencils and Maria had my little black book.

Well, it was a snap. I'd barge into a table, and because I looked it and felt it, the old "friends" thought I was up on top again, and so they were glad to see me. Maria sat quietly with her book in front of her. I told everyone she was gathering material for a novel. Once in a while she would look sharply at a couple of faces and begin to scribble madly. For once in my life I let other people pick up the checks, and we worked practically the whole street. We got out of there with eighteen bucks left, which is something of a record, and I took the lady all the way home in a taxi. We spent the rest of the night poring through the book.

"Man! What a haul! There was

enough dirt there to resurface the Dust Bowl and ten like it. Advance information on big business deals; messings about with the Stock Exchange; who was seeing who, how long, why, and how much it cost; what book a major studio was going to buy; the truth about that fixed fight at the Garden Monday night. I found Maria an excellent editor. Once the little old *poltergeist* has dissipated, she was quite impersonal about what she found out. We took, out of more than two hundred juicy items, ten that were due to happen within the next twenty-four hours. They were carefully picked to do the least possible harm if they were made public, and they all packed a wallop. There was an act of sabotage, three elopements, a decision on the locale of the premier of a new picture, two business deals, a diplomatic stroke of genius, a lapse of option on an erstwhile great movie star, and the name and address of a firm which was going to get a Government contract for high-pressure boilers on the battle-wagons under construction at Boston Navy Yard. I wrote them up, wording them for the most punch, and first thing the next morning I took them up to the newspaper with the largest newsstand circulation in the country. I was in the office for forty minutes, and I walked out with fif-

ty bucks advance. The following day I got a wire to come in and go to work. Every item had come as predicted. Score, one hundred percent.

So I'm back in the big time again. Yes, I'm the guy they talk about. The one about whom they say, "Did you see his column today? Holy Swiss cheese, where does that man get all his information?" And "I'd like to know how a Broadway columnist

gets that radio personality."

Well, I get the first from my wife, who sits quietly, writing in a little black book. She gets her dope from a thousand million little *poltergeisten*. And don't mention radio to me too often. The name of Eddie Gretchen still stinks on the stem, but I don't care. I don't use it any more. You ought to know who I am by this time.

The End

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# ONE WAY STREET

BY JEROME BIXBY

*The other night, while watching Star Trek—Kirk and the Enterprise keep two parallel universes from going boom—we were once again reminded of TV's apparent compulsion for watering down some of the oldest themes in science fiction, in this case one that in its various forms goes all the way back to Murray Leinster's "Sidewise in Time" (1934). One which—by now—requires the sort of sophisticated treatment Jerome Bixby gave it in the following account of a young lawyer stuck in a parallel world on which Shakespeare never wrote Hamlet.*

PETE INNES skidded his '49 Dodge coupé into a tree at fifty-five per, out along Northern Boulevard, one Monday morning. He was on his way to work in Manhattan from Greenhill, Long Island, where he had a ranch-type house, a wife, a dog named Prince, an eleven-year-old son . . . a life.

He started swearing as the car

turned over. As the top crunched in, he was thinking, *Now why in hell should I black out for a second and side-swipe a tree? Going to die, damn it.*

A little academic—but you get that way when you unexpectedly see the scythe coming. Your brain works faster than your glands: you don't have time to feel

much, you only think: your first impulse is a kind of interest.

Luckily the impact of the side-swipe flung Pete over on his face across the front seat: the car flipped, and the top mashed down, but Pete didn't get his head broken — it wasn't there.

The car turned over again: Pete rattled back and forth between the seat-cushions and the crumpled top only a few inches away from his back. Metal howled; glass shattered, dispersing like water; a tire went *whop!* and then another. Pete's muscles wrenched agonizingly, particularly those in his back and neck.

The car lit upright and settled, rocking. Thousands of tiny squeakings for a few seconds. Silence.

Pete kept hearing all the noises, retaining them. He kicked until the left-hand door flew open. He inched himself backward toward it, and did all right until his shoulders reached the steering-wheel, which had been shoved back a foot nearer the seat. He tried to turn and crawl past on his side; he couldn't turn; the squashed roof was too tight overhead. All he could do was let out his breath, pull in his shoulders, and squirm.

His legs emerged, waved in air; he bruised a shin on the running-board. He screwed up his arms and shoved against the steering-wheel, which was now about even with his chin. He went out the door, his coat up over his head.

His feet found ground, then his knees. He was kneeling, his cheek against the cold metal of the sprung door. Hating the car, he shoved himself away from it, hard, with both hands. He went over backwards on grass and dirt. He lay on his back, and brought his hands up to his face and started to cry.

A screech of brakes; footsteps running. Someone knelt beside him. Two hands touched his wrists lightly, as if they wanted to draw his own hands away from his face but were afraid to.

"Are you okay, mister?" a voice said.

The hands got rough. Pete's hands were dragged away from his face. Then the voice sighed, and Pete felt a breath of tobacco across his face: "Lord, I thought your eyes were cut up."

Now Pete was shuddering — long shudders that started in his abdomen and ran up to shake his shoulders.

Another screech of brakes. More footsteps. A new voice said, "Man, how'd he get out of *that* one! He okay?"

The first voice said, "I think so. He's half nuts. Shaken up. Got the hell scared outa him . . . oh, I'm sorry, lady — I didn't see you there."

"I've had first aid," she said. "Move over. I'll feel him."

Pete found that funny. He be-

gan to laugh. Stopped. Hell with it.

There was a studying pause. A light woman's touch ran over his head, his jaw, his neck. Down along his chest. Ran over again, a little harder. It tickled. Pete laughed.

He got a slap on the left cheek that rocked his head; a slap to bring him out of it.

Shock to hysteria to rage. He said ten filthy words, most of them present participles.

The woman said, "I think he's all right. Some ribs broken — bad to laugh."

Pete tried to sit up. He said another few words — gasped them, rather, clapping one hand to his side.

The woman said, "Get down."

She helped him do it. He felt a crunching in his side. Pain was starting. He took a look around at the faces, saw nothing, closed his eyes again and waited for things to happen. He wasn't his own problem, right now: he was theirs. Social action was underway: policemen would come, and an ambulance, and he would be taken care of. People were focussed on him: it often takes disaster to do it, but that's when you're loneliest.

Sound of a motorcycle. Footsteps coming up, then going away at a run; the motorcycle blurted off. About that time Pete slipped into a pain-shot night.

The first thing that was wrong was the telephone in the hospital where he woke up about noon, the same day.

The nurse who was straightening his blanket said, "How are you feeling, Mr. Innes?"

He winced up at her. "Alive."

"Aches and pains?"

"They're lovely."

"It was a bad crash. The officers said the only thing that saved you was that you were pinned between the crumpled roof and the seat—you couldn't bounce around a lot. Except the steering-wheel caught your ribs."

"Has my family been notified?"

"I came in to see if you were awake. Your wife's waiting outside."

Pete sighed. "It'll be nice to stay off the job for a while and romp with my kid . . . as if I could romp!"

The nurse paused at the door, smiling a little severely. "You know, it's no help to put your identification in code, or whatever it was."

Pete blinked.

"Your wallet told us your name, of course—but you have your address and telephone number wrong."

"I don't get you."

"The phone especially—the address was almost right; 1801 instead of 1811. But the thing you have down for your phone number doesn't make any sense. There's

no such exchange. We had to check with Information before we could locate your family."

"You're very pretty," Pete said slowly, "and evidently nuts."

"Thank you, and I'm not," she smiled. "You'd better get that straightened out."

"My identification," Pete said, "is in perfect order —"

But she was gone.

He lay there frowning.

The stuff he'd had in his pockets at the time of the crash was piled neatly on the table beside the bed. He reached over and picked up his wallet and leafed it open to his celluloid-covered card:

Peter M. Innes  
1801 South Oak Street  
Greenhill, Long Island  
New York  
Highview 6-4509J

It was absolutely correct.

The nurse had said it was wrong. Hadn't they *tried* it? The phone? She'd said there was no such exchange. There was a telephone on the table. He gave it a sour look as he put the wallet back beside it. Ordinary black French phone. Maybe a little more streamlined than most —

With a dial that went like this: A-123 — B-234 — C-345 — D-456 — E-567 — and so on to J-000 . . . whatever that was.

He was staring at the phone and shaking his head when Mary came in.

Tears, of course. "Oh, thank

God, thank God, thank God," she kept saying against his shoulder. The pressure of her against his side hurt, but he pressed her closer, thinking the same thing: *thank God*.

Then she was saying, "Oh, darling, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry —"

"For what?" he said.

"The argument." She pressed against his side. "You wanted to die. I just know that's why you had the accident!" He couldn't help gasping at the pressure. She made a shocked sound and pulled back: "Oh, darling, I was hurting you —"

"Loved it," he said.

Her dark eyes were filled with tears, and she did something she hadn't done in years. She bent her head so her hair fell over her face and she brushed the hair across his face, lightly. He inhaled with satisfaction.

"You're not mad, then?" she asked through her soft hair.

"Mad about what?"

"The argument."

He thought a moment, hand on the back of her neck. "What argument?"

The hair swished across his face delightedly. Then her nose was pressed under his ear, and something else happened that hadn't happened in years: she caught a bit of skin between her teeth and worried it with her tongue. His hair lifted.

"Then you're *not* angry any

more?" she whispered softly.

"I —" He gulped, feeling many things. "No, honey, I'm not mad. I — I've even sort of forgotten what we argued about."

"Oh, you *sweet*," she said.

With gentle force he removed the source of the disturbance, getting her to sit up. "This bed's too small for two," he said. "Besides, people like doctors keep wandering in. Cut it out, honey."

She got out a tissue and wiped tears away. She wasn't crying any more — just dry-sobbing a little. She sat on the edge of the bed and held his hand. "You get well," she said.

"Not much to it. Just a couple of busted ribs and some bruises, they tell me. I can leave in a couple of days." He looked at her with a fondness he hadn't felt in some time: maybe the accident had been a good thing. Maybe it had struck away some unpleasantness — or indifference. Married for twelve years. Up and down. A kid. Getting on toward forty, both of them. She was still a darned attractive woman and he wore his years better than most. Lately they'd been — well, just apart. But now she seemed to have taken on flame, and it was welcome warmth. Let it burn. He could feel response in himself; and that old fondness. Flicker, flicker, flame —

"It was an awful quarrel, wasn't

it?" she said. "I've felt awful for days. But it was my damned old pride . . . if you thought I was fooling around with Phil Tarrant, I wasn't going to try to change your mind."

"Phil Tarrant," he said vaguely. "Phil Tarrant . . . do you mean Phil Terrance?"

She frowned. "Phil Tarrant. Our next-door neighbor." Then she smiled. "Our big, bald neighbor, who's just about as attractive to me as a water-buffalo! Oh, Pete, how could you ever think I was having an affair with him? And I'm sorry I threw the picture at you —"

Pete Innes closed his eyes. His next-door neighbor was a big fellow named Phil Terrance. Phil Terrance had all his hair. He was a nice guy, happily married: Pete had never in his life said a word, or even thought a thought, about the possibility of an affair between Phil and Mary. *Never*. He knew damned well that Phil was the big, jovial type of guy that Mary found sexually unattractive. Besides, Mary wasn't the affairing kind: after twelve years he still had to employ the most delicate gambits or else meet a wall, and lately things had simply been *nicht*. Now, of course, Fate had struck a spark; the prognosis was good; maybe if he *had* suspected her of tramping, he would also have suspected that someone had

done a fair job of velocitating her. But he didn't suspect anything of the sort, and he'd certainly never accused her of it.

It would all straighten out.

"What picture?" he asked cautiously.

"Oh!" She bent and kissed him.

"You just want to pretend you've forgotten all about it! It's *sweet!* But don't. Let's admit honestly that it happened, and *then* forget it. Now — I'm sorry."

"I — I'm sorry too," he said.

Indirection was in order.

"Lucky you didn't hit me," he said.

"Well —" she grinned a little shamefacedly. "I really didn't throw it to hit. But it certainly wrecked the finish on the piano!"

Piano. . . .

He *had* no piano. They'd been planning to buy one, for Pete Jr., but they hadn't yet.

It was too much.

"*What* piano?" he said, half-rising against pain. "We don't *have* one. Mary, what in blazes is going on? I don't remember you throwing any picture. I don't remember any argument. Phil Terrence is *not* bald. I've never accused you of fooling around with him. *What's going on?*"

The doctor said, "It's probably only temporary, Mr. Innes. Amnesia induced by shock."

Pete said patiently, "Doctor, I do not have amnesia. There is

no blank spot in my memory. I remember everything right up to the moment of the crash."

"Well," said the doctor, smiling, "I wouldn't worry about it. Not exactly amnesia. You've just forgotten certain things, and gotten others a little mixed up."

Pete said, "Like hell I have."

"You wouldn't *know*, Mr. Innes. You wouldn't know if you had things mixed up. They would seem real to you, even if you were seeing pink dragons. But — well, after all —" he indicated the telephone dial — "you have described some other sort of telephone, for example. What can I say, Mr. Innes? I am fifty-seven years old. Since I was a child, telephone dials have been numbered in this manner. They're that way all over the United States, I believe, and very possibly all over the world."

"They're not."

The doctor sighed. "You're a little confused from shock, that's all. I wonder if you'd mind talking with one of our staff psychologists —"

"I would."

"I've already taken the liberty of calling him."

"I resent that," Pete said coldly.

"You shouldn't."

"I'm as sane as you are."

"I'm sure you are. But he will be able to do a more expert job of convincing you that the things

you imagine to be true, and the things you imagine not to be true, are simply as they are and must be accepted as such — because you *are* sane."

Pete reached for the telephone. He let his fingers think for him. He could make no sense out of the number system anyway. He dialed his office — not the number, but the fingerhole-sequence.

A voice said, "Yes?"

Pete said, "Reilly, Forsythe and Sprague?"

Pause: "Sorry, buddy, wrong number."

Pete tried again, letting his fingers do the aiming. He dialed his mother's place in the Bronx: "Mom?"

"Not that I know of," a man's voice said dryly.

Pete slammed the phone back on the carriage so hard the bell tinged. He lay back and closed his eyes.

Mary said — she was crying a little again — "Oh, Pete, darling. . . ."

Pete compressed his lips.

"You'll be all right. . . ."

"I *am* all right."

*And the whole world's wrong.*

"Of course you're all right," the psychologist said. "You're not crazy."

"Don't use kid terms on me, doc," Pete said. "I took psych in college. I'm not afraid I'm 'crazy'. I can describe the condition you

think I'm in just as resoundingly as you can. But I'm not *in* it."

"Then you didn't pay attention to a very important point in your psych course," the psychologist said. "It's the hardest thing in the world for even a trained person to apply to himself. You should know that a person who is illuded or hallucinated or subject to fantasies of any kind cannot be expected to —"

"So I'm —"

"— the validity of his beliefs —"

"— I'm not in a position to evaluate in terms of the real world," Pete said wearily. "*A priori* you're right, *ipso facto* I'm wrong."

"— needs outside assistance, don't you see?"

"*Caveat emptor.*"

The psychologist indicated the phone, as the doctor had done. "This is the real world. It exists. Evidence. As a lawyer you must appreciate evidence."

Pete Innes thought very deliberately and carefully for two, three, four, five minutes, while the psychologist waited, as psychologists do.

Then he said, "I suppose so. You *must* be right. I hope I sound sane. Phones have always been built that way. I have a piano. My wife threw a picture at me . . . what picture, honey?"

"The picture we took last summer of Pippy," Mary said.



Pete's lips tightened. "Pippy?"  
"Our dog . . . our . . . don't you — remember?"

"I remember," he said. *Our dog Prince.*

"It should pass," said the psychologist. "Traumatic amnesia and fantasies. I would advise you strongly to see an analyst if it doesn't pass — you may not be able to recover all you've forgotten, but he should be able to —"

"Get out," Pete said.

"— and help you adjust." The psychologist rose. "I'll drop in later."

"Don't." Pete stiffened his body on the bed, wanting to leap and scream. "Get out, Mary."

"Pete —"

The psychologist said quietly, "Come, Mrs. Innes." He paused at the door. "You won't like this, Mr. Innes, but I'll naturally have to take precautions. In your state —"

"I understand," Pete said. "I accept. Have me watched. I don't care. I just don't want to talk any more."

The psychologist went out. Mary started after him, nose buried in tissue.

Pete felt two tears start down his own cheeks. Suddenly his eyes filled. He yearned. He was terrified and cold. His back teeth gritted together. "Stay, Mary," he said.

They were close on the bed for a few minutes, she lying on his

broken ribs and hurting them, he hugging her fiercely so it would hurt more. Pain was real.

She was crying silently, eyes and nose running — the way she cried when she was really miserable, not just being feminine. After a while she got up and went over to the window. The venetian blinds were down and slanted shut. "Maybe some sun will cheer us up," she said.

Up went the blinds.

Pete knew he was in the New York Hospital. On the tenth floor. Looking out the window he could see the Chrysler building, downtown on 42nd Street, and beyond it, the Empire State building, with a slender spire atop it, like the Chrysler, instead of a never-used blimp mooring-mast and TV tower surmounting, good old Channel 4.

He screamed. It all came out. A large interne was in the door and at his side, looking wary, before he had exhausted the breath. Mary fainted.

Two months later they let him go home.

He objected at first to what was virtually imprisonment, but they said, "Citizens' Protection Law, you know."

He didn't know. And he was a lawyer.

The psychiatrists were good. They worked hard. He understood that their fees were paid by the

government — Citizens' Protection Law. Well, fine.

They made him socially acceptable. They showed him where and how he was wrong. They brought in proof by the armload — books, photographs, films, actual documents and records of his own life containing mention of three jobs he couldn't remember ever having held and numerous other interesting data, such as his former marriage to a girl named June Massey —

Once he had been engaged to a girl named Jane Mason.

They brought in the proof and talked to him about it.

They convinced him. They proved that the world he lived in was not the world he thought he knew. They proved that he was imagining. That he was occluded here, and was building dream-stuff of asynchronic data there. They proved that the Empire State building had always had a spire; that the U. N. had resolved the Korea conflict two months after hostilities had commenced; that Prokofieff — always a favorite of Pete's — had not died in 1953 but was still alive, though ailing; that television was not yet commercially perfected; that Shakespeare had written no *Hamlet* —

He quoted from the play. They were amazed. They said, My God, you should write!

There were times when he

thought he'd go crazy. Other times he was certain that he already was. There were still other times when it was all a diabolic plot — Petè Innes vs. the World.

Heady conceit. For a madman.

Pete wasn't, of course . . . just a whim that delighted him, and concerned the psychiatrists, at one stage in his progress.

There had been no Shelley. He quoted Shelley.

Keats, they said.

He quoted Keats.

My God, you should write!

Still, they adjusted him. Physical facts talked.

But he never ceased to recall the world he'd imagined. It remained as clear in every "remembered" detail as this one, the real one, was in physical fact.

They adjusted him.

After all, he was an intelligent man. The theory of what had happened to him was clear: the actuality of it, once presented authoritatively to him, was equally as clear.

They adjusted him.

Now he knew what it must feel like to believe you are Napoleon. Long fall from the saddle.

Emotional acceptance came.

He believed.

Home was different. Well, he'd had to expect it to be.

Pippy was a cocker. *Prince had been a Collie.*

His house had five rooms. *Six.*

It was green. *Rust.*  
There was a flower garden out  
back. *Vegetable garden.*

Pete Jr. was dark-haired. *Tow-  
head.*

He wandered around, acquaint-  
ing himself with his life. Some  
things were a lot different. There  
were shades of difference in others.  
Still others were identical, or so  
nearly so as to defy him.

His library . . . he went over  
it book by book, and came across  
his copy of Bertrand Russell's  
HISTORY OF WESTERN PHI-  
LOSOPHY — the one he'd taken  
to Russell when the philosopher  
was in New York on a lecture tour  
back in '45.

He sat there, hugged it, cradled  
it, loved it. It was a remembered  
thing. Then he opened it.

He had *never* made marginal  
notes in that book.

But obviously he had.

Adjust.

That night Phil Terrance —  
Phil *Tarrant* — came over. Phil  
was bald. *Brown hair.* Pete found  
that he was evidently not quite so  
close to Phil as he'd been in his  
dream-world. He mentioned the  
golf games they had played to-  
gether.

They hadn't.

Undressing for bed, Pete said,  
"Where do you suppose I *got* that  
world, honey? The dream one.  
It's so — complete."

Mary tossed aside her slip and  
swayed a little toward him, her

dark eyes inviting, warm, soft.

"Forget your dream-world,  
Pete," she whispered. "This is  
real."

A much nicer, more open bit of  
enticing than he could remember  
Mary ever doing. He wondered  
what had triggered her, and  
thanked whatever it was. And she  
had a small mole on her stomach  
that he didn't remember.

They made the kind of vigor-  
ous, exhausting love they hadn't  
made in years . . . the years of  
his dream-world, at any rate. Now  
his still-mending ribs made it both  
a little difficult and delightful.  
They laughed at the necessary  
concessions, and had fun. This  
was a sweeter Mary than dream-  
Mary.

In the following days home from  
the office he spent a lot of time at  
the typewriter.

Doing?

He was writing a conspectus of  
the dream-world. He was looking  
for identities, similarities, antith-  
eses in the real world, and noting  
them. He was pouring out his  
incredible fantasy before it should  
vanish in years.

He used a two-column system:

DREAM-WORLD	REAL WORLD
Jewish State: Israel	Sholom
FDR died in 1945	Same
Atomic power	Not yet
Stalin dead	Alive
Lautrec a dwarf	Normal

. . . and long pages of intense

lawyer's analysis, drawing fine and significant distinctions, searching for historical bases for existing things and measuring them against "memories." The manuscript grew to several hundred pages. It could have gone on forever. It's perhaps easier to change a world than one's understanding of it.

Through this project, and the omniverous reading it involved, he became closer to the real world. His analyst — he had consulted one, and now visited him twice a week — was thoroughly in favor of it. He learned. At first it was often shocking. Then only exciting. At last, enjoyable, nothing more.

Then it palled. Pete ceased writing. Six months had passed. He only read. More calmly, now. The need to discharge tension, and even a tiny lingering disbelief, had vanished.

There had been newspaper publicity, of course. At first just a little — then, as the sensational aspects of his case got out, a lot.

#### NEW YORK LAWYER HAS DREAM-WORLD

Sex, Science and Sociology on  
Another Earth

The *Times* did a dignified interview. *Life* gave him four pages, *Time* a column, *Scientific American* a squib.

Adjusted. And far happier than he'd ever been in his life.

Then they came and tore it all

to shreds. Ripped it all to pieces.

The dry voice on the phone said, "Mr. Innes, we've read about your case in the *Scientific American*."

"Yes?" said Pete, wondering what they were selling or buying — he'd already signed for several articles.

The voice hesitated. "I don't think this should be discussed over the phone. May we come and see you personally, at your convenience?"

"Who are you?"

"Forgive me — I — this is all rather extraordinary, Mr. Innes. Most extraordinary. My colleagues and I . . . allow me, I am Doctor Raymond van Husen. I — hello? Hello?"

Pete was staring across the room. At his bookcase. At the green-jacketed book entitled *THE COMING CONQUEST OF THE ATOM*, by Dr. Raymond van Husen, twice Nobel Prize winner. Van Husen, who in the dream-world had figured so importantly in the Manhattan Project and Oak Ridge.

"Yes, Doctor," he said. "I've heard of you. What can I do for you?"

"What is important," said van Husen, "is what *we* may already have done to *you*, and what we may be able to do about it."

Pete clutched the phone so hard his knuckles crackled in his ear. "*Done to me?*"

"I — well, actually, *we* didn't do it to you. If our theory is correct . . . Mr. Innes, I think we had better come and see you."

"Tonight," Pete said harshly, standing alone between wavering realities. "Tonight."

Van Husen's grey goatee bobbed as he said, "Parallel worlds, Mr. Innes. Coexisting worlds. We believe that you are on the wrong one, simply on the wrong one."

Pete was sprawled in the big chair by the fireplace. Enrique Patiño, physicist, sat on the piano bench. Doctor Hazel Burgess, an attractive woman of fifty or so, was on the couch, sitting beside Mary.

Pete said, "Simply on the wrong one."

Mary said, "Pete . . . Pete, what are they saying?"

"They're saying I'm on the wrong world. Don't listen."

Mary bit the back of her hand.

Pete took a belt at the straight Scotch he held. "So your machine got out of whack," he said. "Somebody forgot to tighten a bolt, you say. It flipped on its mounting, you say. Instead of shooting its tight beam at the pretty target, it went through the side of the building, across Flushing Meadows and walloped me before you got it under control. You say."

"Not *our* machine," said Hazel Burgess. "Our machine radiated

at the real Peter Innes, you see."

"That's either stupid or insulting," Pete said. "I think it's both, in fact. *I'm* Peter Innes." He took another belt.

"I'm sorry," Hazel Burgess said. "I meant that our machine radiated at the Peter Innes who belongs on this Earth. The machine on your Earth radiated at you." She stopped and bit her lip. "*I am* sorry. When we read about you . . . it was quite a shock to finally realize what must have happened —"

Pete stood up quietly and, without a break in his motion, flung his glass into the fireplace with every ounce of his strength. Scotch hissed on the burning logs. "Damn you," he said. "Damn you, one and all."

"Two Earths," van Husen said, looking at the blue alcohol flames. "Almost identical. Two almost identical experiments, aligned on the time continuum. Two almost identical mishaps. A transposition of Peter Inneses. It must have happened that way. There is no other satisfactory explanation. Very likely identical results as well. The automobile accident — the hospitalization — the . . . m'm —" He looked at Mary, caught Pete's eyes full-blast and looked away, goatee bobbing.

"Don't be a damned old Dutchman, Raymond," Hazel Burgess said. "My God!"

"Please go," Pete whispered.

"Perhaps we can help you, Mr. Innes," Enrique Patiño said softly. His wrinkled face turned toward Mary. The look he gave her was old and Latin. "If you wish us too, that is."

Pete swayed on his feet.

Mary got up and half-ran into his arms. "Peter, I *don't* understand —"

*Mary? Was it Mary?*

"Our experiment," said van Husen, "was an attempt to —"

"God damn your experiment. Get out and leave us alone!"

"But, Mr. Innes, we may be able to reverse the effect and return you —"

At last tears came. They rushed. Sometimes a man has to cry like a baby — when the world gets as fearsome as a baby's. Or when there isn't any world.

"He's been drinking since you called," Mary said, holding him fiercely.

The scientists left. And they left a card:

GRADEN RESEARCH INSTITUTE  
Flushing, N. Y. 27 F-E 395

He became a meaningless man. A wrongness. Earth beckoned. His own reality called: called in a giant voice that sounded his nature like a taut wire, now that he knew.

He couldn't doubt.

Men of van Husen's caliber didn't speak loosely. They'd all seemed pretty positive. And, of

course, it explained everything.

Earth called.

At times he felt alone in the Universe. This Universe. Mary lay warm beside him, holding him with body and mouth, and this Universe was an icy microfilm between them that kept him alone.

He became aware of a force. A tension grew in him, became nearly intolerable. *He shouldn't be here.* Originating in the farthest slow galaxies, transmitted to nearer ones, gaining amplification with every angry star, transmitted again and again, strong with the hearts of novae and the rioting pulse of variables, a complex of forces seemed to be gathering — forces that were trying to push him out of this Universe: as if in some manner he were alien, a dissonance. Fact? Fancy? Had he added one atom too many to the sum of this Universe? If so, he might break the gears.

Pete Innes, Universe wrecker. Once or twice he watched red sunsets, wondering if this might be the night of his nova.

No longer alone.

Pressure.

This Universe was too much with him.

The little things closed in:

Eroica      Napoleon Symphony  
Democrats      Jeffersons  
Trueorfalse? Trueorfalse?

This Universe hated him. Resisted him. Struck at him. Whether

real or subjective, the sensation grew to a torment and a terror. It lashed at him from directions he could not defend against, or even define . . .

Unable to sleep, he would pace in darkness comparing his now-situation with his then-situation.

Earth *II* — he thought of this world that way — was preferable to him in many, many ways. He liked his job — he'd discovered that he was a partner in his firm —

But only one was important. The love and warmth at home . . . the new Mary . . .

He paced, and cringed, and thought, and cursed this Universe — and decided.

She cried when he said he must go back to his Earth.

He explained and explained. He wasn't her Pete. She wasn't his Mary. This wasn't his world. He could not remain here and stay sane.

"Oh, I love you," she wailed. "I won't let you do it."

"You'll get your own Pete back," he said heavily. "On my Earth he must be going through just about the same thing as I am here. The scientists will have contacted him. He'll be planning to return."

"I don't want any other Pete! I want *you*!"

*That*, he thought, goes double, and he went for a long and miserable walk. Nothing else to do.

He wondered if his counterpart, his *doppelganger*, was out walking too, feeling all the things he felt: the tearing need to get back to his own life-situation, but with specific regrets. Perhaps he'd even found in Mary *I* something comparable to the things Pete had found in Mary *II*. It was possible, in this intricate business of balances.

Also, he probably had a hating Universe on his back —

At any rate, there was no way out. Or rather, the *only* way was out.

And his double on Earth would be thinking the same thing, for whatever reasons. Identity. Or near identity.

He decided on one last week. Mary seemed reconciled. The reality of the situation, and its necessities, had at last become clear to her; or perhaps she had at last accepted it.

They spent that last week almost as lovers. They went out. Nightclubs, the theater. They had fun together. Their sexual encounters were spiced with a certain feeling of adventure, discovery. They had fallen in love for the second time, really, yet for the first time, really, and they made the most of it — she perhaps unconsciously trying to hold him, he enjoying for the last time the woman Mary *I* was not.

The day they drove to the



Graden Research Institute, he expected her to cry. But she didn't. She seemed to be thinking.

His tears? . . . They would come later, on lonely Earth. Best if she didn't know how much he cared.

The machine was bigger than he'd thought it would be. An enormous metal tube running off at a tangent from something very like a cyclotron. At the end of the tube was a metal ball about three feet in diameter, suspended on an equatorial axis. One round red glass eyelet peered out of the surface opposite the end of the tube — peered into a large, open-ended metal box, through which was strung an intricate webwork of wires.

"We wanted to send one atom — just one atom — into another dimension," Enrique Patiño said. "So, I'm almost certain, did our counterparts on your Earth. But we sent our Peter Innes instead. And they sent you to us." He pointed at the two desks that stood back-to-back across the room. They were heaped high with papers. "We have computed. This has taught us interesting things. It would appear that one atom — and, believe me, our beam would scarcely touch more than one at a time — one atom will insist upon taking the organic whole of which it is a part with it on its trip between dimensions."

"I wonder if I crashed my car, then," Pete mused, "or his. Where's the thin red line? Molecules mixing, the vapor that is mixed with the vapor that is the car —"

"His, we believe. It would be impossible to say for certain. It is our belief, however, that the phenomenon of transposition-of-the-whole applies only to living matter and all objects with the range, to certain degrees of distance and intensity, of its electromagnetic field —"

He talked on.

Pete looked at the machine.

Was another Pete Innes, on another Earth, looking at a machine right now?

He hoped so. And he hoped he was a good man. Mary II was a damned good woman.

"Where," he said, "do I get my ticket?"

"This way," called van Husen, from over by the metal ball. He'd been fussing with the round red eye.

"Shouldn't there be a fanfare?"

Pete said sourly. "Reporters, cameras? Not that I'm in the mood."

"We —" Enrique Patiño paused. "Understand, Mr. Innes, we would like to delay your departure, at least for a short while, and question you about your Earth. We might have questioned you before, but we had no wish to invade the privacy of your rather peculiar

domestic situation. We wanted you to come to us. Now . . . well, I'm afraid we will have to be satisfied with the observations of *our* Peter Innes. Our recent work indicates that it may be very dangerous for you to remain here. Dangerous for you — and for us."

"I've felt it too," Pete said. "Out of tune. I don't jitter right."

"We made our decision this morning. We were preparing to invite you when you came of your own accord."

"And if you'd invited me, and I said no, you'd have called out the Marines."

Patiño smiled an astonishingly young smile. "Oh, yes. Actually, we doubt that your introduction into our Universe will affect it for many millions of years. The disruption would have to proceed to fantastically high levels before it would make itself felt. But as scientists, we cannot take the chance of letting you stay any longer. Your influence is theoretically cubed every sixty-one point o-four-six-nine hours."

"I'm not the same as when I came," Pete said. "I've shed millions of molecules. I've incorporated others. I'm wearing different clothes."

"We must predict some sort of compensating mechanism, and hope we're right."

"Then maybe there's no prob-

lem . . . aside from the way *I* feel?"

Patiño sighed. "Perhaps. But we know so *little* about such things . . . which accounts for the lack of fanfare. After you've gone we will dismantle the machine. The less anyone knows about this line of research, the better. Perhaps, right now, we are being foolish. But perhaps we should be terrified."

"Well," Pete said a little nervously. "When do we start?"

"Any time."

"When will *they* start?"

"When we do . . . or vice versa. I believe that identity on that level can be relied on: we seem to be expressions of Universal laws . . ."

"Now," snapped van Husen. "Let's not talk all day."

"If I could only take — a book or something," Pete said.

Patiño shook his head. He took Pete by an arm and stood him in front of the globe. The red glass eye pointed at Pete's forehead.

Pete had said his good-byes to Mary. He didn't look at her now. It happened very quickly.

Patiño lifted a hand in farewell.

Van Husen pressed a button somewhere behind the metal ball.

Mary cried, "*Pete* —"

Machinery whined to instant high-pitch, drowning her cry.

Mary was in his arms.

The laboratory was about the same. So was the machine. The

round red eye lost its brilliancy. The whining stopped.

Everybody just stood and breathed.

Holding Mary, Pete looked around and smiled. He said, "I hardly recognize you without your beard, Dr. van Husen."

Then he said to Mary, "I'm glad you did that. I couldn't ask you to."

Now she was crying. "I—I thought that if *I* did, then *she* would . . . or maybe *she* thought of it first —"

"You'll like *my* Pete Junior," he said softly. "And the Mary who just left here will be a good mother to yours."

The scientists were coming alive. Ten minutes of gleaming-eyed inquiry followed, after which Pete said that he and Mary would like to get along.

Van Husen trailed them out into the corridor. The other two,



an identical Patiño and a somewhat less attractive Hazel Burgess, were busy dismantling the machine.

At the elevator door van Husen said, "You *will* cooperate with us, Mr. Innes?"

"With deepest gratitude," Pete said, and squeezed Mary's arm.

The elevator door opened. Inside was nothing but a steady blue light.

Van Husen said politely, "After you."

Pete said, after a moment, in a dead voice, "It's okay, darling — our elevators are different. Quite different."

Grimly he stepped off into empty blue space, five stories above the ground, Mary at his side. Van Husen followed.

They floated on blue light toward the ground floor.

Pete thought: *The only thing to do when you're going down a one-way street to nowhere is pull over to the side: I'll pull over here, I guess: I won't tell Mary: I'll keep quiet, and the others will too.*

His eyes opened wide: *How many others?*

Down.

The ground floor.

*We'll just have to see if it's millions of years or tomorrow. Maybe this one won't hate me.*

It wasn't tomorrow. And it didn't.

He was content.

*Not so long ago—before astronomer Fred Hoyle's steady state theory changed all that—science-fiction writers were fond of offering plot variations on the idea that between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter there once was a planet now blown all to smithereens. An intriguing notion which—way back in 1934—Henry J. Kostkos put to good use when he "followed" one of those fragments all the way to distant Earth, a world which—except for its arrival—might never have had either North or South Magnetic Poles!*

# NORTH GODS TEMPLE

## HENRY J. KOSTKOS

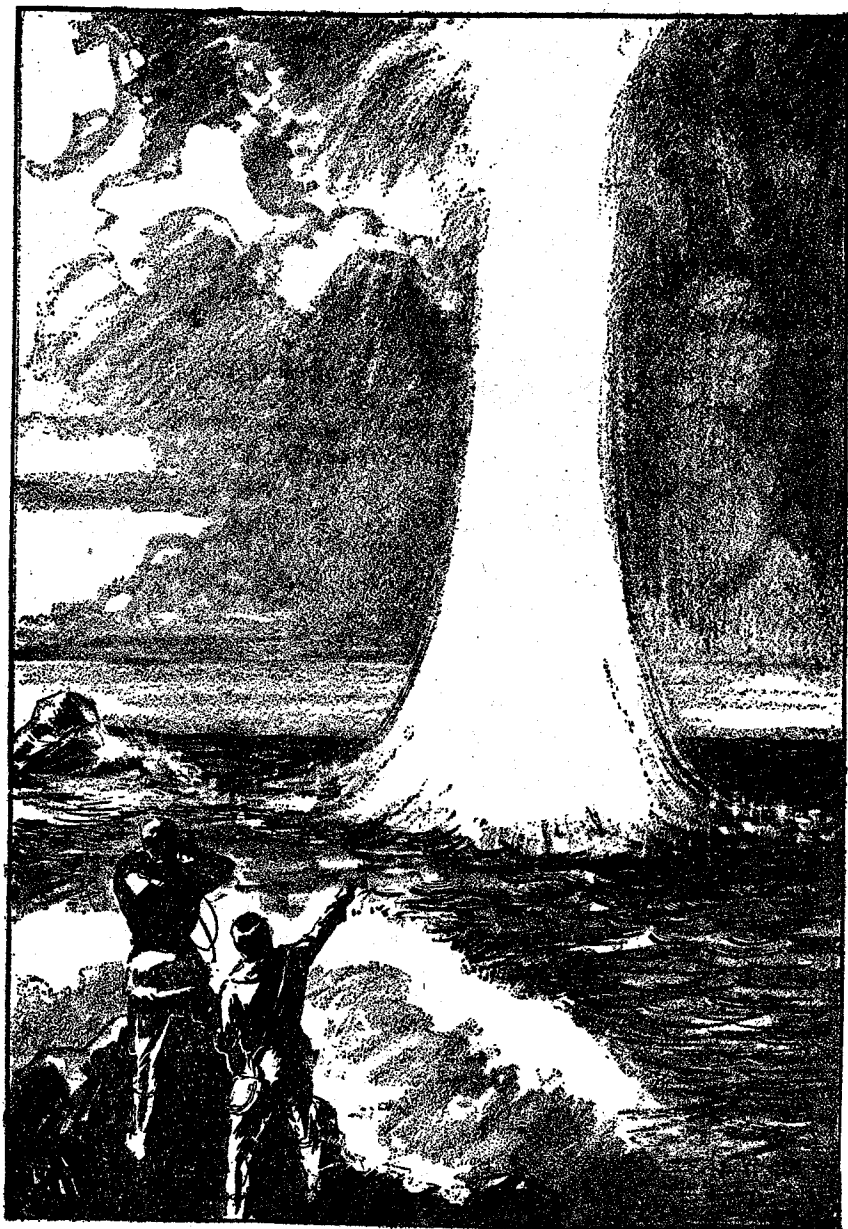
Illustrated by MOREY

OUT of the north came the call, strong and clear and compelling. Straight into the mind of Professor Darius Norton it penetrated as he bent low over a specially designed magnetograph in his laboratory at the Cosmopolitan Museum of New York. For many days he had been tantalized by the undecipherable impulses that came from the instrument to agitate his brain cells with weird bits of intelligence. Then, as if his nervous system had become attuned to the flashes or waves emanating from the device, his senses suddenly grasped the message, and, having once learned its import, he could not rest. It gripped him in its power with an

impulse as primordial and compelling as the urge to live.

Could he believe his senses? Yes! In the mind of Darius Norton there was no doubt of the authenticity of that message. It came straight from the far north, from the base of the magnetic pole. And it would not give him peace, not until he obeyed its command and followed it to its arctic source.

It was on a quiet Sunday afternoon of a lovely June day—one of those rare days when the restless body and mind of the professor was in tune with the peaceful world. He dozed off momentarily on his laboratory stool, then awoke with a jar to find himself sprawled on the floor. Not only



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was he upset physically, but his mental equilibrium became a seething turmoil as the message surged into his inner consciousness, rising and fading spasmodically as it conveyed these enigmatic thoughts:

"We are the historians of the People of the Magnetic God . . . from a far planet we were hurled . . . penetrated the crust of the earth . . . entrance in Tana Fiord . . . into an ocean under the ocean . . . our race is dying fast . . . in the Temple of the Magnetic God . . ."

It wasn't the message alone, which came as a translation of a strange, high-pitched foreign group of syllables into understandable thought waves, but a compelling urge, a hypnotic power that gripped him and drew him to the mysterious and little understood regions of the north magnetic pole. Darius Norton was a man transformed with desire; his serenity had been caught in a cyclone that tore it to shreds. Into the chemistry of Professor Norton had been poured a reagent that took complete control of him. From that day on there was but one meaning of life for him—explore this mystery—and do so at once.

He operated the magnetograph again and again, but the instrument was mute except for its orthodox function of recording the strength and direction of the mag-

netic force. But he had enough to go by. A sixth sense told him that he must first reach Tana Fiord, on the northern coast of far-off Norway. An expedition? That was it. And without further delay Professor Norton set about to do something that, under ordinary circumstances, his integrity would never have permitted him to consider.

He summoned his staff to the conference room. First and foremost was Raymond Cullen, his assistant and perhaps the only man in whom he had ever fully confided. The gigantic frame of Darius Norton, his flaming red beard, his eyes that flashed out to the world, the fanatic impulses of pure genius that motivated the man, *plus* a tongue ever ready to cast forth acid irony, made it exceedingly difficult to find any one possessing sufficient courage and tolerance to penetrate to the man's inner self.

As director of the Cosmopolitan Museum he had a staff of archeologists, paleontologists and other scientists, who had been acclaimed the world over for achievements in their respective fields. Yet it was always the professor's theory that the best way to further develop good men was to constantly keep them on their toes, and, in fact, to tread none too lightly on those same toes by subjecting all of their shortcomings to ruthless yet just criticism.

Now he had to gain their sup-



port and co-operation, for in these depressed times expeditions could not be authorized, even by the director of the world's largest museum, without reasons more substantial than the desire to follow ethereal thought waves coming from nowhere. He would have to resort to subterfuge.

Professor Norton's eyes swept over the faces of his staff and he placed his long index finger on a map of the Arctic regions and boomed: "This was the location of the north magnetic pole during the Archæozoic Era two thousand million years ago, when the great planet that moved between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter disintegrated into what we now call the asteroids."

His colleagues waited in silence for their director to continue.

"As you know, my observations and calculations prove that during the period of disintegration, countless millions of particles were violently hurled into space, and their path was such that many of them were carried within the orbit of the earth. They struck our planet at some heretofore unknown spot, but now, since my calculations and magnetograph observations have definitely fixed the location of the shifting magnetic pole during that period as the northernmost part of Norway on the shores of the Arctic Sea, it is there that I expect to find fragments of that once great planet."

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"But what has the magnetic pole to do with these meteorites?" Raymond Cullen puzzled.

Professor Norton pointed his bristling red beard toward his questioner. "The meteorites, as you call them, are composed of highly magnetic metals that were once a part of this disintegrated planet." His booming voice was tinged with sarcasm that never failed to exasperate his listeners. "And as you know, Cullen, magnets have the peculiar property of attracting other magnetic substances, as a simple experiment will convince you."

Cullen reddened, but he did not appear offended; the others chuckled softly to themselves. So long as Norton hadn't directed his shaft of sarcasm at them, they could enjoy his sallies at the expense of some one else. But the next moment they glanced wryly at one another when the director stared fixedly at each of them in turn, and, in the tone of voice he would have used in inquiring into the cause of some unpleasant phenomenon that perplexed him, growled: "I wonder, gentlemen, why it is that I was destined to be endowed with the most stupid staff ever assembled under the roof of any museum? But you will undoubtedly be glad to know that I will not be compelled to rely upon your brains to produce any epoch-making ideas when we reach the site of our excavations. All we will need there is some



brawn. Here, here! Don't look at me with those bovine expressions. I'll make it plain: you guys will have to spit on your hands and dig!"

For a moment there was no sound except the sharp intaking of breaths by the eight men around the table. Then a babble of excited voices broke out: How soon were they to leave? How many of them were to go? Would they be finished before winter locked the northland in its icy hold? They were young again, alive with the enthusiasm of youth for adventure in far lands. There was not an individual who had not roamed back and forth over the world many times in the performance of his work, yet each expedition was a fresh adventure, holding out the lure of many fascinating discoveries.

Professor Norton held up his hand for silence. "We are scheduled to leave in ten days, gentlemen," he boomed.

The rusty old tramp steamer "Seahorse" rounded North Cape after twenty-two pitching and groaning days across the Atlantic and up into the Arctic Sea. Professor Darius Norton, who had irritated himself into a black gloom, from which not even his own witty falshes of irony served to elevate him, now became more tractable as the end of the voyage loomed into sight. He had taken Ray Cullen and four other asso-

ciates from the museum and, in addition, Dr. Zuggler of the University of Copenhagen had joined the expedition at Stavanger, Norway. There was also a group of technicians and artisans, as well as laborers, who were to attend to the mechanical details of the heavy excavation work that Norton anticipated.

In spite of the director's dour manner and his every-ready sarcasm, he had endeared himself to all on board, from laborer to distinguished scientist. There was something lovable about the man's idiosyncrasies, backed as they were by his superb intelligence. They all noticed how fanatic he was in his eagerness to reach the site of the excavation, and long before the "Seahorse" steamed into the mouth of Tana Fiord, his geologist's tools and instruments were packed in a bag and on deck, ready to be taken ashore.

"Cullen"—his voice rumbled loudly in the silence of the lonely sea, and re-echoed from the bleak shore line—"there's something here that's big—I feel it, can't keep my mind thinking rationally; it wanders to all sorts of impossible and crazy notions. "I feel"—he pitched his voice low until it was no louder than a hoarse whisper—"that there is something pulling me to these shores and that I will discover—"

Before Norton could finish, he

was hurled off his feet, along with everyone else on deck, by the sudden stopping of the vessel, which halted its headway as effectively as if a giant hand had clutched its keel. There was no impact, as would have been the case if a subterranean reef had been struck, or even the soft drag offered by grounding on a bank of mud. Instead, the vessel was sucked down until her rails were awash, then released to bob up like a cork, while the propellers churned the water futilely. Slowly the unseen force swung the vessel around until her bow pointed in the direction from which she had come and, as mysteriously as she had stopped, she churned ahead again.

It all happened so fast that no cry of alarm had been raised by those on board. Now the men on deck rushed to the stern to gaze shudderingly at a seething maelstrom of boiling from which the vessel had emerged.

"What in the name of the devil could that have been?" Cullen asked Archeologist Gregg, alongside of him.

Gregg shook his head in bewilderment, then pointed excitedly toward a figure leaning out over the stern.

"Good God, Cullen, is that Professor Norton?" he whispered, not daring to believe his eyes.

It was indeed the professor. But the man had been transformed into a strange creature;

his huge frame had dwarfed into the malformed body of a hunchback, his defiantly flowing red beard hung like a tattered curtain from a trembling chin, while the deeply tanned color of his face had blanched into the whiteness of the snow of the distant mountain peaks.

Cullen and Gregg reached the taffrail not an instant too soon. The professor had strained his body far beyond the limits of safety, and even as he lurched toward the water, the two men clutched his legs and hauled him inboard. The fact that he did not struggle, or even take notice of his rescuers, indicated that suicide had never entered his mind. It was some dreadful facination, some unknown and terrible force that had almost drawn him into the seething white waters. Toward what, Cullen wondered.

They hurried him to his cabin, without being able to make head or tail of his mutterings. Even after he had been given a stiff jolt of Scotch, he remained inarticulate and groped with unseeing eyes at the bed-clothes in his berth.

"Go call the doctor to look him over"—Cullen drew Gregg aside—"and then we had better take turns to see that he stays put until we get ashore."

When the expedition disembarked on the rocky coast and set up camp, Professor Norton be-

came quite normal in his actions. He directed the work of erecting the tents and preparing the equipment for excavating. Only by his recurring fits of moodiness did he give evidence of something weighing on his mind. And on frequent occasions he stole away from the camp, carrying his magnetograph, and made for the headland, from which he stared fixedly out over the fiord toward the spot where the ship had been held fast by that mysterious force. It was during these periods that Ray Cullen so worried about the red-bearded giant that he invariably stalked him to the bluff, managing to keep out of sight, yet staying close enough to be able to reach the professor's side almost instantly if needed.

Whether by design or coincidence, about a week after the party had landed on the bleak northern shore, Norton dispatched Cullen with a group of laborers to start the excavation work at a point he designated some distance inland. As Gregg was also assigned to the group, there was no one to whom Cullen could confide his fears for the professor's safety. So it was with misgiving that he got under way with his men and equipment. No sooner had the party disappeared from sight beyond the ridge of the hill, than Norton hastened for the shore, where the metal rowboat belonging to the expedition, was beached.

He hunched his giant frame to the task and hauled the heavy craft down over the rock-strewn beach into the water. With sinewy arms he sped the boat over the waves straight for the spot upon which he had focused his gleaming eyes for many days. In his eagerness to reach this mysterious location he timed his strokes in a loud booming voice that penetrated the silence of the bleak north. "One, two, one, two, one, two . . ." he chanted as his oars flew over the water.

Back beyond the hill Cullen stopped to listen.

"Hear that, Gregg?"

"It's Professor Norton," the archaeologist cried with conviction.

Cullen glanced at the man significantly. "I'm going back there; something's up." And he was off on a run without waiting for Gregg's reply. Gregg joined him.

Panting for breath, Ray reached the headland and scanned the choppy waters of the fiord. Almost a mile out he spotted a tiny object bobbing up and down as it rose on the crest of a wave, then disappeared into the trough of the sea. There was no doubt in his mind that it was the rowboat with Norton in it, as there was no other human being in that vicinity, who could have been out upon the water. And the fact that the boat was directly over the spot where the "Seahorse" had been held helpless, verified his suspicion.

Just as his fumbling hands finally focused his binoculars, a geyser of water shot up into the air for what must have been a height of a hundred feet, completely enveloping the boat. When the geyser subsided in a seething whirlpool, the boat and its red-bearded occupant had vanished from sight!

"Good Lord!" Cullen exclaimed, then ran like mad toward the camp for help in launching the heavy motor boat that was lying far up on the beach. The entire population of the camp rushed down and hauled the vessel out into the fiord. For two hours the boat chugged its way back and forth across the stretch of water where Cullen last saw Norton, but without any results. Not a single drifting object could they find which had belonged to the ill-fated professor. It was a sorrowful group of individuals that dragged slowly back into camp to mourn the mysterious loss of their leader.

When Professor Norton reached the mouth of the fiord, his mind suddenly became rational. The mysterious force, this obsession, that had numbed his sound reasoning and transformed his mind into a thing of blind impulse, the inexplicable power that had drawn him to this horrible, yet fascinating spot, now left him. At once he realized the danger of his position, but it was too

late to do anything about it.

With a hiss like the bursting of a hundred water mains, a geyser of spray and water shot up all around him, as an irresistible whirlpool caught his boat in its vortex and twirled it around with the speed of a swift moving centrifuge. The cry of anguish that escaped from Norton's lips was drowned in the crescendo of swirling waters that sucked his vessel down into its funnel.

The scientist's mind went blank as he saw himself sinking into a bottomless pit of green water. When he came to his senses, Norton was still in the metal row boat, but he could see absolutely nothing either ahead, behind or above. In fact, were it not for the swish of water against the sides of the boat, he would have sworn that he had landed in a coal bin in a dark cellar at midnight.

He groped his way cautiously toward the bow and then did an amazing thing. From a locker under the forward seat he pulled out a dish shaped object with wires dangling from it, then felt around in the dark until his fingers touched a switch. As he snapped it, a beam shot from the reflector he held and flooded the course of his boat with a brilliant white light. Stretching into the distance as far as the powerful rays could penetrate was a broad body of inky water, black and foreboding. As he swung the

searchlight, the beams played upon rocky walls and a high vaulted ceiling.

Professor Norton was in a subterranean sea, moving along at a tremendous rate of speed, the walls flashing past him like the sides of a tunnel through which an express train was speeding!

He threw some chips of wood overboard. In an instant they dropped behind and were lost to sight. There was no doubt about it, his vessel was being attracted by a powerful magnetic force, as there was absolutely no current drift in the direction he was traveling.

Professor Norton chuckled softly to himself: "If I had told Cullen and the rest of the gang that I expected all this they would have had me in a straitjacket before I could have finished my story."

Then he consulted a portable magnetograph he fished out of the locker, along with a box of crackers, with which he had secretly stocked the row boat for just such an adventure.

"Hm, the magnetic force is stronger than I had estimated. Proves that slide-rule jugglery doesn't always pull the right number of rabbits out of the hat."

He amused himself, while leisurely crunching a cracker, by flashing the search-light around and studying the changing character of the subterranean passage. There was no fear that the light

would be extinguished for lack of power, as he had provided an ingenious generator that operated when the swift-moving field coils in the boat cut the intensive magnetic lines of force in the tunnel. Green, slime-covered walls dripping with moisture, jutting rocks that reached out their sharp points to tear at him, the echoes of the lapping waters, black slimy shapes that rose to the surface, then disappeared into the inky water—all these would have unnerved a man made of less stout stuff than the red-bearded giant who impassively studied every passing characteristic on his strange journey. The temperature of the water was delightfully warm to his touch.

"Probably volcanic origin," he mused. "It's bound to become steaming hot before long."

But in this he was mistaken. The temperature of the water dropped steadily, the air in the passage became chilly, and finally frost appeared on the rocky ledges. Professor Norton donned the parka he had previously removed and was thankful for its comforting warmth.

Soon slabs of floating ice appeared, first as white patches in the distance, then the floes became denser until Norton peered with some alarm ahead of him to see a solidly frozen sheet stretching blue-white into the remote distance.

It was only a matter of seconds

before he would be hurled at express speed against this sheet of ice which would surely crumple the thin metal hull as if it were an egg shell. He had to act quickly; no time to lose now. Just as the little vessel reached the solid ice, he threw his weight into the stern, and the bow of the craft shot high into the air. The bottom struck with a sickening thud that threw Norton's head forward until he thought that it had parted company with his spine; then, at slackened speed, the boat continued over the rough ice pack to the smooth frozen surface, over which it fairly zoomed like a swift flying bird. The powerful force had converted the metal craft into an ice-boat that slid along on its keel strips. Norton took a deep breath of relief, then huddled in the bottom with the searchlight pressed close to his body for warmth.

He consulted his black notebook. Yes, at the estimated rate of seventy-five miles an hour in a westerly direction he would reach his destination in about fifty hours, after passing beneath the Arctic Ocean, glacier-covered Greenland, Baffin Bay, Baffin Land and the Gulf of Boothia. But fifty hours spent in this weird, lonely place, speeding like mad toward an unknown destination, was not any too pleasant to contemplate, even for such a staunch-hearted scientist as Norton. If he had only taken Cul-

len into his confidence he was sure that his good friend would have joined him without an instant's hesitation. But now it was too late. The song of the runners over the ice made him drowsy; he dozed off, and finally fell into a deep sleep.

"Crunch, splash!"

His slumber was brought to an abrupt end by the boat breaking through the ice and sailing beyond into open water. The frozen sheet had terminated, and his course now lay through water once again. But a new element entered to disturb his equilibrium. The hours of friction over the ice had worn the keel of the boat down until it traveled along on the unprotected plates of the bottom, wearing the metal so thin that the water squirted into the boat in a heavy spray.

Norton seized a scoop and began to bail furiously, not daring to stop even long enough to take his bearings. How long he had slept, or how far he had traveled during that time he had no way of determining.

It was nip and tuck now between the rise of the water in the bottom of the boat and the speed with which he could work the scoop. Hour after hour he kept bailing, but it was a losing fight. Slowly the water rose, first to his ankles, next half way up his leg—then the light went out. The generator, which he had failed

to enclose in a waterproof housing had been short-circuited. True, there was his pocket flashlight, but he must conserve the precious batteries for future emergencies, for only God knew when he would be able to find his way out of this dismal chamber.

With head bent low and his mind on the immediate task of bailing, Norton did not see the dark solid mass that loomed-up ahead. Steadily the boat bore down upon this obstruction. A collision was inevitable. As the bow of the vessel crashed into an unyielding substance, the professor jerked his head around and tried to jump. But it was too late. With irresistible force the boat telescoped itself into buckled and twisted steel plates. Norton's body fetched up hard against a hard substance and everything went black.

Slowly consciousness returned to the man. Living fires were searing his frame; warm red blood oozed from a dozen cuts and scratches; one arm hung immobile and useless, with a broken collar-bone protruding through the torn flesh.

Looking around with dazed eyes, Norton found himself on a narrow plateau above the reach of water. What remained of the boat had probably sunk from sight when he was hurled clear of the wreckage.

Cautiously he stretched out one leg, then the other. They, at

least, were intact. After a half dozen exhausting attempts, he was able to raise his body on his shaky legs, and hold himself erect by leaning heavily against a cold, hard wall. Now he became curious. The scientist within him had taken control over the obstacle of physical pain and mental fatigue. He ran his hand up and down the side of the massive object. It was glass-smooth to the touch. With his good arm he managed to reach the flashlight in his pocket. Luckily it had escaped destruction.

He swept the beam upward. There, towering some two hundred feet above him was an obelisk-like tower of gleaming ebony! A hundred windows cut its smooth surface, while at the top, crowning the summit, was a huge ball studded with crystal windows that flashed back his light in a cascade of spectral colors.

Norton's eyes gleamed with a fanatic fire. Here was his goal, the proof that his researches and experiments had not been misdirected!

The base of the obelisk flared out to the platform on which he stood, and then disappeared from sight under the inky water. How much of it was below the surface Norton had no means of knowing, but he judged that at least seventy-five feet would be needed to stably support the mass of the huge tower.

When he attempted to walk he



found his back glued to the wall. He tugged and pulled frantically, but to no avail. Then he grinned sheepishly and reached around for an object in his hip pocket.

The heavy automatic pistol he pulled out immediately flew from his grasp, crashed solidly against the wall, and stuck there! It was the steel of the pistol which had held him. He was now released and free.

"Magnetite; although a thousand times more powerful," he exclaimed, examining the substance closely, "yet it is different from any mineral found on our earth. Yes, I am positive that this structure was hurled from some far planet." And he whispered in an awed voice: "The message was right, it must be the Temple of the Magnetic God!"

Working his way cautiously around the base of the structure, which he found to be octagonal and approximately fifty feet across, he came to the entrance he was seeking. A circular doorway, gloomy and uninviting led to the inside of the temple. He had left his pistol adhering to the outer wall, yet without any thought of fear, he boldly entered and flashed his light around. The next moment he regretted his lack of caution.

As he turned his head he drew back with a jump, to stare right into the vacant eye sockets of a monstrous skull! And strewn

about within the chamber were hundreds of other skulls and bones of the creatures who had worshipped and died here. The air was dank with the odor of death and decay, the walls were festooned with rotted draperies, the floor slimy from the ebb and flow of the water that had flooded the place periodically.

He nerved himself to examine the remains more closely. The bones were green with mould and crumbled to powder at his touch. It was evident at a glance that the creatures who had used the temple for worship were not human beings in any sense of the words as applied upon the earth.

The skull was massive, measuring more than a foot across and shaped not unlike that of a huge bird, yet it had a high and deep cranium, denoting the possession of an enormous degree of intelligence. The thorax was short, and the thigh bones of the four legs unbelievably small; but the two arms, terminating in delicate phalanges indicated that the creature had twelve extremely sensitive fingers that could only have been possessed by a race skilled in performing precision work or operating complicated machines.

Glancing up from the bones at his feet, Professor Norton's eyes riveted themselves upon a circular opening in the middle of the vaulted roof. The opening appeared small to him below but it was undoubtedly large enough to

admit the priests of the temple to the chambers where they had lived and worked. The shaft was as smooth as the bore of a shotgun, and he could detect no means of reaching it to gain access to the upper part of the temple.

"They might have used ladders," he mused, "but creatures possessing the intelligence of these surely must have employed a more efficient system—some type of elevator, perhaps."

This thought gave him an idea. He took out his pocket knife and held it in the palm of his hand. "Whizz! It was whisked aloft straight into the shaft.

"That's the answer, a magnetic elevator! Now, to find the car."

He kicked away some rubbish and bones and discovered a circular trap door directly below the shaft. At first he imagined that it led to the basement of the structure, but he now realized that it had some bearing upon the mode of ascent. After considerable scratching around he found the combination, and as he pushed a button the trap-door sank down slightly then slid aside, revealing a car that resembled a huge iron pot. Boldly he stepped into it, and taking a chance, pulled a lever that projected from its side. At once the released vehicle shot up into the air and entered the opening like the plunger of a solenoid. Up it went, until it came to rest at the first level.

Eagerly Norton stepped out into a laboratory that was filled with strange looking machinery and instruments. With the eagerness of a small boy in a toy shop, the red-bearded scientist minutely examined every item and with fond hands caressed the fine mechanisms. Some of them he understood, but there was much more that puzzled him.

The problem of descending in the elevator was solved when after trying the various controls in the car, he discovered the one that served to neutralize the magnetic force, permitting the car to drop by gravity.

On an upper level he found the electrical generating plant in an operative condition. Fortunately all the metals used by these creatures were non-corrosive, which accounted for the perfect preservation of the equipment. He threw a switch, and at once the room, and in fact the entire tower, lit up with a soft sea-green light that illuminated perfectly without dazzling the eyes. Now he had sufficient light to continue his search for the thing that had lured him into making this perilous journey—the Records of the Magnetic God which he instinctively felt must be hidden somewhere in this very tower.

It was three days before his search was rewarded by finding the records in a sealed chamber at the summit of the temple. The

records consisted of a strip of metal tape, wound on a reel, like a motion picture film. The tape ran through a complicated looking apparatus composed of coils and wire and tubes, to reappear on a take-up reel at the other end. And near by was the fast disintegrating remains of the last of the Magnetic people. Judging by the condition of its body it must have been alive not many months ago.

"This device must be the one that translates the magnetic impressions into thought waves, and was apparently operated recently by this creature to send out the very waves that I was able to intercept with my magnetograph back in the museum! Now to get it working again . . ."

This, however, was no easy task. Day after day he drove his pain-racked body to the almost helpless problem of discovering the riddle of this complicated piece of apparatus. It was not until three weeks that the tape gave up its secret. But in his weakened condition Norton felt but scant triumph. His wounds pained excruciatingly and the broken collar-bone was an added source of worry, although he had managed to bind his arm securely to avoid moving it.

At first he had faced starvation with a stoical calmness, but the pangs of hunger had driven him to swallow some pills that appeared palatable, whereupon he

discovered that they contained all the nourishment he would need for many days.

Now into the brain of the red-bearded scientist the machine flashed the story of the great race who had worshipped in the Temple of the Magnetic God. And these thought-waves impressed upon his mind the struggles, the triumphs, the ultimate disasters that will always be the lot of all creatures of the universe.

The records told of a far planet that once moved majestically between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter, harboring a race of intelligent and scientifically advanced people who chose for their god that father of all power, Magnetism. Then came the catastrophe . . . the fierce terrifying temblors of their planet . . . its cleavage into a million fragments, which were hurled far into space . . . the landing of the temple upon the planet earth in what was now called Tana Fiord. Deep into the bowels of the earth, into a subterranean sea, the majestic temple bored its way, carrying its load of creatures. During its swift passage, the highly magnetized temple induced its magnetism into the body of iron ore through which it passed, and it was this force that held the "Sea-horse" in its grip and pulled Professor Norton's boat into the passage. For on the earth there was no magnetic force prior to the coming of the Temple of the Mag-

netic God; this was the beginning, the origin of the mysterious terrestrial magnetism.

Gradually the creatures adapted themselves to the strange underground existence and managed to survive. They soon discovered that their huge magnetic temple appeared to change its location periodically. This was explained by the tendency of the magnetic drag, created by the tower, to hold it stationary, while the earth whirled around and away from it on its axis. The drag served to retard it so that it apparently made a complete circle around the north axis of the globe every 480 years.

"Exactly the same period as the secular change of declination of the magnetic pole!" Norton exclaimed. "I wonder—"

His musings were interrupted by an awesome swirling sound. He looked down from the window at the top of the temple to see the black water surging upwards at an alarming rate. Down in the lower chambers the remains of the magnetic creatures, the machinery and the debris were already swishing about. Now the water reached the generators; the lights grew dim and went out. Norton climbed up high in the dome of the temple, clinging to a projecting ledge with his good arm. With blood-shot eyes he watched the black, inky fluid rush in through the elevator shaft, wash away the translator ma-

chines and the precious Records of the Magnetic God and reach relentlessly upward to gather him in its clutches.

Suddenly Norton held his breath and listened. Clearly he could hear it! Or was it a delusion? Coming from far off was the screech of the "Seahorse's" whistle!

The Temple of the Magnetic God swayed dangerously as Darius Norton struggled desperately to maintain his precarious hold. Then the water reached for him and sucked him into the seething maelstrom to disappear with a horrifying scream . . .

Cullen stood on the bridge of the "Seahorse" when she slowly steamed into a cove on Boothia Peninsula. Tucked away in Professor Norton's duffle bag he found a hastily scrawled note. It read:

"It is futile to try to find me as by the time you read this I will be dead or many miles from here. There is one chance. Leave here at once and proceed to Boothia Peninsula, to site of present magnetic north pole and wait. Norton."

Now Cullen was taking readings of the force from the near-by magnetic pole with a unifilar magnetometer, when the needle of the instrument began to swing wildly. In his excitement he yanked the whistle cord to call his colleagues. The screech of the whistle rever-

berated over the silent wastes and re-echoed from the distant ice caps. It reached into the far corners of the north country, and deep into the bowels of the earth where the man who had discovered the secret of the mag-

netic pole sank with his secret, into the waters that buried him forever within the North God's Temple.

The End

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# The Roller Coaster

by **ALFRED BESTER**

*Whenever we see a new Alfred Bester article or profile—in some slick like Holiday—we of course get to it first thing, just to see what so superb a craftsman has been up to since the days when—with The Demolished Man (1953)—he introduced a note of “class” into a field sometimes accused of poking along without it. A quality more than evident in the following diabolical short, in which—willy-nilly—time travel is turning a Great Society into a masochistic slum!*

I KNIFED her a little. When you cut across the ribs it hurts like sin but it isn't dangerous. The knife slash showed white, then red. She backed away from me in astonishment, more startled at the knife than the cut. You don't feel those cuts at first for quite a few minutes. That's the trouble with a knife. It numbs and the pain comes slow.

“Listen, lover,” I said. I'd forgotten her name. “This is what

I've got for you. Look at it.” I wagged the knife. “Feel it.” I slapped her across the face with the blade. She stumbled back against the couch, sat down and began to shake. This was what I was waiting for.

“Go ahead, you bitch. Answer me.”

“Please, David,” she muttered. Dull. Not so good.

“I'm on my way out,” I said. “You lousy hooker. You're like



Illustrator: B. Krigstein



all the rest of these cheap dames."

"Please, David," she repeated in a low voice.

No action here. Give her one more try.

"Figuring you for two dollars a night, I'm into you for twenty." I took money from my pocket, stripped off the twenty in singles and handed it to her. She wouldn't touch it. She sat on the edge of the couch, blue-naked, streaming blood, not looking at me. Just dull. And mind you, a girl that made love with her teeth. She used to scratch me with her nails like a cat. And now . . .

"Please, David," she said.

I tore up the money and threw it in her lap.

"Please, David," she said.

No tears. No screams. No action. She was impossible. I walked out.

The whole trouble with these neurotics is that you can't depend on them. You case them. You work them. You build to the climax. You trigger them off, but as often as not they dummy up like that girl. You just can't figure them.

I looked at my watch. The hand was on twelve. I decided to go up to Gandry's apartment. Freyda was working Gandry and would most likely be there setting him up for the climax. I needed advice from Freyda and I didn't have much time left.

I walked north on Sixth Avenue — no, The Avenue of the Americas; turned west on 55th and went to the house across the street from Mecca Temple — no, The New York City Center. I took the elevator up to the PH floor and was just going to ring Gandry's bell when I smelled gas. I knelt down and sniffed at the edge of Gandry's door. It was coming from his apartment.

I knew better than to ring the bell. I got out my keys, touched them to the elevator call-button to dissipate any electrostatic charge on them, and got to work on Gandry's door. I barbered the lock in two or three minutes, opened the door and went in with my handkerchief over my nose. The place was pitch dark. I went straight to the kitchen and stumbled over a body lying on the floor with its head in the oven. I turned off the gas and opened the window. I ran into the living room and opened windows. I stuck my head out for a breath, then came back and finished airing the apartment.

I checked the body. It was Gandry all right. He was still alive. His big face was swollen and purple and his breathing sounded a little Cheynes-Stokesish to me. I went to the phone and dialed Freyda.

"Hello?"

"Freyda?"

"Yes?"



"Where are you? Why aren't you up here with Gandry?"

"Is that you, David?"

"Yes. I just broke in and found Gandry half dead. He's trying suicide."

"Oh, David!"

"Gas. He's reached the climax all by his lonely lone self. You been building him?"

"Of course, but I never thought he'd —"

"He'd try to sneak out on the pay-off like this? I've told you a hundred times, Freyda. You can't depend on potential suicides like Gandry. I showed you those trial-cut scars on his wrist. His kind never give you any action. They —"

"Don't lecture me, David."

"Never mind. My girl was a bust, too. I thought she was the hot acid type. She turned out to be warm milk. I want to try that Bacon woman you mentioned.

Would you recommend her?"

"Definitely."

"How can I find her?"

"Through her husband, Eddie Bacon."

"How can I find him?"

"Try Shawn's or Dugal's or Breen's or The Greek's. But he's a quonker, David. A time-waster, and you haven't much time left."

"Doesn't matter if his wife's worth it."

"She's worth it, David. I told you about the gun."

"Right. Now what about Gandry?"

"Oh, to hell with Gandry," she snapped, and hung up.

That was all right with me. It was about time Freyda got sense enough to lay off the psychotics. I hung up, closed all the windows, went back to the kitchen and turned on the gas. Gandry hadn't moved. I put out all the lights,

went down the hall and let myself out.

I went looking for Eddie Bacon. I tried for him at Breen's, at Shawn's, at Dugal's. I got the break at The Greek's on East 52nd Street.

I asked the bartender: "Is Eddie Bacon here?"

"In the back."

I looked past the juke box. The back was crowded. "Which one is Eddie Bacon?"

He pointed to a small man alone at a table in the corner. I went back and sat down. "Hi, Eddie."

Bacon glanced up at me. He had a seamed pouchy face, fair silky hair, bleak blue eyes. He wore a brown suit and a blue and white polka-dot tie. He caught me looking at the tie and said: "That's the tie I wear between wars. What are you drinking?"

"Scotch. Water. No ice."

"How English can you get?"

He yelled: "Chris!"

I got my drink. "Where's Liz?" I asked.

"Who?"

"Your wife."

"I married eighteen feet of wives," he mumbled. "End to end. Six feet each."

"Three fathoms of show girls," I said.

"Which were you referring to?"

"The third. The most recent. I hear she left you."

"They all left me."

"Where's Liz?"

"It happened like this," Bacon said in a bewildered voice. "I can't figure it. Nobody can figure it. I took the kids to Coney Island. . . ."

"Never mind the kids. Where's Liz?"

"I'm getting there," Bacon said irritably. "Coney Island's the damndest place. Everybody ought to try that trap once. It's primitive stuff. Basic entertainment. They scare the hell out of you and you love it. Appeals to the ancient history in us. The Cro-Magnons and all that."

"The Cro-Magnons died out," I said. "You mean the Neanderthals."

"I mean prehistoric memories," Bacon went on. "They strap you into that roller coaster, they shove you off and you drop into a race with a dinosaur. He's chasing you and you're trying to keep it from ending in a dead heat. Basic. It appeals to the stone-age flesh in us. That's why kids dig it. Every kid's a vestigial remnant from the stone age."

"Grown-ups too. What about Liz?"

"Chris!" Bacon yelled. Another round of drinks came. "Yeah . . . Liz," he said. "The girl made me forget there ever was a Liz. I met her staggering off the roller coaster. She was waiting. Waiting to pounce. The Black Widow Spider."

"Liz?"

"No. The little whore that wasn't there."

"Who?"

"Haven't you heard about Bacon's Missing Mistress. The Invisible Vice Girl? Bacon's Thinking Affair?"

"No."

"Hell, where've you been? How Bacon rented an apartment for a dame that didn't exist. They're still laughing it up. All except Liz. It's all over the business."

"I'm not in your business."

"No?" He took a long drink, put his glass down and glowered at the table like a kid trying to crack an algebra problem. "Her name was Freyda. F-R-E-Y-D-A. Like Freya, Goddess of Spring. Eternal youth. She was like a Botticelli virgin outside. She was a tiger inside."

"Freyda what?"

"I don't know. I never found out. Maybe she didn't have any last name because she was imaginary like they keep telling me." He took a deep breath. "I do a crime show. I know every crook routine there is. That's my business — the thief business. But she pulled a new one. She picked me up by pretending she'd met the kids somewhere. Who can tell if a kid really knows someone or not? They're only half human anyway. I swallowed her routine. By the time I realized she was lying, I'd met her and I was dead. She had me on the hook."

"How do you mean?"

"A wife is a wife," Bacon said.

"Three wives are just more of the same. But this was going to bed with a tiger." He smiled sourly. "Only it's all my imagination, they keep telling me. It's all inside my head. I never really killed her because she never really lived."

"You killed her? Freyda?"

"It was a war from the start," he said, "and it ended up with a killing. It wasn't love with her, it was war."

"This is all your imagination?"

"That's what the head-shrinkers tell me. I lost a week. Seven days. They tell me I rented an apartment all right, but I didn't put her in it because there never was any Freyda. We didn't tear each other apart because there was only me up there all the time. Alone. She wasn't a crazy, mauling bitch who used to say: 'Sigma, darling . . .'"

"Say what?"

"You heard me. 'Sigma, darling.' That's how she said goodbye. 'Sigma, darling.' That's what she said on the last day. With a crazy glitter in her virgin eyes. Told me it was no good between us. That she'd phoned Liz and told her all about it and was walking out. 'Sigma, darling,' she said and started for the door."

"She told Liz? Told your wife?"

Bacon nodded. "I grabbed her

and dragged her away from the door. I locked the door and phoned Liz. That tiger was tearing at me all the time. I got Liz on the horn and it was true. Liz was packing. I hung that phone up on that bitch's head. I was wild. I tore her clothes off. I dragged her into the bedroom and threw her down and choked her. Christ! How I strangled her . . ."

After a pause, I asked: "Liz?"

"They were pounding on the door outside," Bacon went on. "I knew she was dead. She had to be dead. I went and opened the door. There were six million cops and six million honest johns still squawking about the screaming. I thought to myself: 'Why, this is just like the show you do every week. Play it like the script.' I said to them: 'Come on in and join the murder —'" He broke off.

"Was she dead . . . Freyda?"

"There was no murder," he said slowly. "There was no Freyda. That apartment was ten floors up in the Kingston Hotel. There wasn't any fire-escape. There was only the front door jammed with cops and squares. And there was no one in the apartment but a crazy guy — naked, sweating and swearing. Me."

"She was gone? Where? How? It doesn't make sense."

He shook his head and stared

at the table in sullen confusion. After a long pause he continued: "There was nothing left from Freyda but a crazy souvenir. It must have busted off in the fight we had — the fight everybody said was imaginary. It was the dial of her watch."

"What was crazy about it?"

"It was numbered from two to twenty-four by twos. Two, four, six, eight, ten . . . and so on."

"Maybe it was a foreign watch. Europeans use the twenty-four hour system. I mean, noon is twelve and one o'clock is thirteen and —"

"Don't overwhelm me," Bacon interrupted wearily. "I was in the army. I know all about that. But I've never seen a clock-face like that used for it. No one has. It was out of this world. I mean that literally."

"Yes? How?"

"I met her again."

"Freyda?"

He nodded. "I met her in Coney Island again, hanging around the roller coaster. I was no fool. I went looking for her and I found her."

"Beat up?"

"Not a mark on her. Fresh and virgin all over again, though it was only a couple of weeks later. There she was, the Black Widow Spider, smelling the flies as they came staggering off the roller coaster. I went up behind her and I grabbed her. I pulled her around

into the alley between the freak tents and I said: 'Let out one peep and you're dead for sure this time.' "

"Did she fight?"

"No," he said. "She was loving it. She looked like she just found a million bucks. That glitter in her eyes . . ."

"I don't understand."

"I did when I looked at her. When I looked into that virgin face, happy and smiling because I was screaming at her. I said: 'The cops swear nobody was in the apartment but me. The talk-doc-tors swear nobody was ever in the apartment but me. That put you inside my head and that put me inside the Section Eight ward for a week.' I said: 'But I know how you got out and I know where you went.'" He stopped and looked hard at me. I looked hard at him.

"How drunk are you?" he asked.

"Drunk enough to believe anything."

"She went out through time," Bacon said. "Understand? Through time. To another time. To the future. She melted and dissolved right out."

"What? Time Travel? I'm not drunk enough to believe that."

"Time Travel." He nodded. "That's why she had that watch — some kind of time machine. That's how she got herself patched

up so fast. She could have stayed up there for a year and then come right back to Now or two weeks after Now. And that's why she said 'Sigma, darling.' It's how they talk up there."

"Now wait a minute, Eddie —"

"And that's why she wanted to come so close to getting herself killed."

"But that doesn't make sense. She wanted you to knock her around?"

"I told you. She loved it. They all love it. They come back here, the bastards, like we go to Coney Island. They don't come back to explore or study or any of that science-fiction junk. Our time's an amusement park for them, that's all. Like the roller coaster."

"What's the roller coaster?"

"Passion. Emotion. Screams and shrieks. Loving and hating and tearing and killing. That's their roller coaster. That's how they get their kicks. It must be forgotten up there in the future, like we've forgotten how it is to be chased by a dinosaur. So they come back here for it. This is the stone age for them."

"But —"

"All that stuff about the sudden up-swing in crime and violence and rape. It isn't us. We're no worse than we ever were. It's them. They come back here. They goad us. They macerate us. They stick pins in us until we blow our tops and give them their

roller coaster ride."

"And Liz?" I asked. "Did she believe this?"

He shook his head. "She never gave me a chance to tell her."

"I hear she kicked up quite a fuss."

"Yeah. Six beautiful feet of Irish rage. She took my gun off the study wall — the one I packed when I was with Patton. If it'd been loaded there wouldn't have been any make-believe murder."

"So I heard, Eddie. Where's Liz now?"

"Doing a burn in her old apartment."

"Where's that?"

"Ten-ten Park."

"Mrs. Elizabeth Bacon?"

"Not after Bacon got D.T.s nailed to the name in the papers. She's using her maiden name."

"Oh, yes. Elizabeth Noyes, isn't it?"

"Noyes? Where the hell did you get that? No. Elizabeth Macy." He yelled: "Chris! What is this — a desert!"

I looked at my time-meter. The hand was halfway from twelve to fourteen. That gave me eleven days more before I had to go up. Just enough time to work Liz Macy for some action. The gun was real promising. Freyda was right. It was a good lead. I got up from the table.

"Have to be going now, Eddie," I said. "Sigma, pal."

---

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*Through the years some have claimed that science and poetry don't mix, that reason and feeling are in perpetual warfare with each. However, back in the thirties, Miles J. Breuer, M.D., managed to resolve the conflict nicely in the lyric that follows—a celebration of Man the Scientist subduing Nature in all its mystery.*

# Vis Scientiæ

By Miles J. Breuer, M.D.

"Once they feared us," said the Powers,  
Sitting round in council grim,  
They that ruled man's fearful hours,  
Made him shrink from terrors dim;

"Now we serve them," said the Powers,  
Owned up to it one by one;

"No more their reason from us cowers."  
These are things that they have done:

They have chained the livid lightning that goes hurtling down the sky,  
Made it slave for them and pass them scatheless as it hurtles by;  
They have trapped the furious tempest at whose breath the forest reels,  
And the angrier it rages all the merrier turn their wheels;  
The ocean is their plaything; they have placed upon his back  
Mighty palaces, nor swerves them all his lashing from their track;  
The thundering of the cataracts, the swing of wave and tide  
Must meekly light their dwellings, and must draw them when they ride;  
E'en the sun, almighty monarch, whom the ages held in awe,  
Now must yield and run their engines; even on his strength they draw.

O'er the stretching, lonesome plains,  
League on league and waste on waste,  
Creep and wind their humming trains,  
On, in whirling, roaring haste.

'Cross those reaches, empty, vast,  
O'er the boundless, fearful sea,  
Speed their heralds, countless, fast,  
Huge in throbbing majesty.  
Where the dismal desert rolls,  
Stopping not for rocks nor mires,

(Continued on page 154)

*Although now probably best known for the exceedingly popular Professor Jameson stories (remember "The Planet of the Double Sun"?), which back in the thirties helped to make the Depression years a little less depressing than they might have been, Neil R. Jones also delighted early readers of Amazing with many non-Jameson stories. Such as the following still crisp account of first contact between two visiting Martians and an exiled cave dweller who lived two hundred millenia before the fall of Rome!*

# Martian and Troglodyte

## NEIL R. JONES

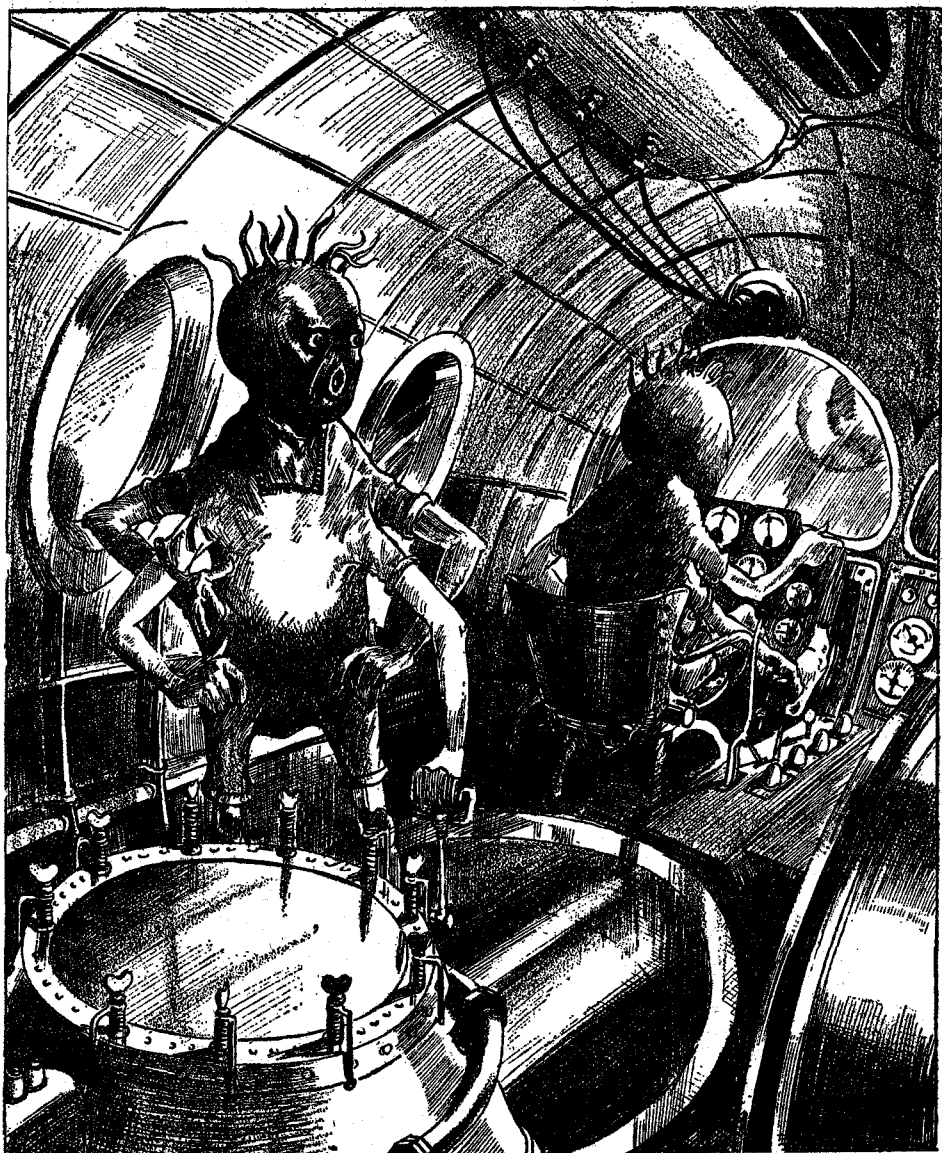
Illustrated by MOREY

### Chapter I The Tiger Charges

**T**hrag, the cave man, wandered disconsolately through the lush verdure of his prehistoric forest, completely oblivious to the menacing beasts which prowled constantly around him in their ever active quest for materials with which to appease the cry of their hungrystomachs. A bloated, flaming sun shone down upon the humid jungle and plain which teemed with the myriad life of all species. Huge, shadowy forms crept through the luxuriant riot of vegetation, evidencing their presence by occasional thundering bellows. They

strode across the ground which was to see two hundred thousand years later the tramping of Rome's legionaires setting forth to conquer the world for the Eternal City. The lesser beasts warily evaded the gigantic reptiles in their predatory forages, slinking discreetly from the paths of these colossal engines of destruction. Even the shaggy cavebear was reluctantly forced to admit their superiority, and ambled away from the paths of the great beasts, grumbling.

Above the teeming jungle, swarming with its numerous carnivora, large, bulky, forms flapped dismally on broad wings, circling, soaring and frequently



MARTIAN AND TROGLODYTE

darting downward to seize some luckless animal in serrated jaws to be borne screaming aloft.

Behind Thrag, a pair of yellow, fiery eyes gleamed wickedly, and a long, red tongue licked out hungrily across cruel saber teeth, as they froze in palatable anticipation upon the back of the caveman whose sorrow was of such depth as to render him reckless in his disregard for the possible consequences involved in his unguarded progress through the terrible forest. Great padded feet lifted themselves cautiously as the big tiger with tail lashing nervously, stalked this prospective feast. Of all meat, the saber-toothed progenitor of our modern tiger preferred the choice tidbit offered by the appetizing carcass of man.

There was, however, a nameless dread connected with this puny, defenceless animal which walked erect, a dread that always held the great striped cat from an immediate seizure of its prey, inducing the animal to stalk it for a considerable distance before charging. Perhaps an inferiority complex subconsciously stimulated in the unreasoning brain of the great cat by the bipeds' more advanced intelligence had something to do with it. Anyway, it was true that the gigantic feline held off longer in siezing the man than if he had been a wild buck or other prey.

The cave man proceeded carelessly through the jungle; the great cat softly followed.

Thrag, brooded in vengeful, gloomy rumination upon the wicked injustice that had been done him three days previous by the tribe in which he had been born. Nrok who had succeeded the deceased Gwri to chieftainship of the Cliff Dwellers, following the latter's death, had been intensely desirous of Tua, Thrag's mate. In their youth, Tua had chosen Thrag for her lover and had repulsed the advances of the ardent, unwanted Nrok, and since then Nrok's ardor for the unattainable Tua had increased rather than lessened, and there had arisen within his evil mind an intense hatred for Thrag. Nrok had been next in line of succession to the tribal chieftainship, and with the death of Gwri, who had been gored by the tusk of an enraged, hairy mammoth, Nrok had assumed the robes of regal authority, and had lost no time in venting his hate upon the luckless head of Thrag, incidentally placing within his reach the coveted feminine prize, Tua.

The craft of the villainous Nrok had cunningly devised a plot whereby Thrag was proved disloyal to the tribe with the subsequent result that Thrag was exiled from the Cliff Dwellers, and all his property, including

his mate, was confiscated to the general welfare of the tribe. As was to have been expected, Nrok had immediately claimed Tua, increasing his marital retinue to three.

There had been nothing else for Thrag to do but to leave the vicinity of the Cliff Dwellers where his beloved Tua remained under the power of the dominant Nork. But Thrag had not wandered far.

For the past three days and nights he had courted death amid the innumerable perils of the jungle and plain as he thought to devise some means by which he might possibly recover his Tua and wreak a revenge upon Nrok, his unprincipled arch-enemy. He used but little caution in his traversing of the forest, and his fine senses of sight, hearing and smell were dulled by the morbid retrospection of his mind obsessed with its vital problem. A merciful fate had saved him from danger, guiding his feet from the haunts of the fearsome beasts which roamed both forest and plain, and had protected him from harm.

His reckless bravery, which had characterized his combats with those denizens of the wood, which he had come upon too late to avoid a meeting, had stood him in good stead, and he had yet to succumb beneath

attack of the fearsome creatures. Several long, red, newly healing gashes upon various portions of his body attested to the fact that he had not emerged from the melees unscathed.

Once a great snake had encircled his body and the tree crotch in which he slept one night, and he had been forced to literally hack the reptile's head from the body in a reek of blood, before the twisting, squirming, folds of the disgusting animal let loose their hold to fall to the ground. Later that night, Thrag had heard from out of the darkness below his tree, the noise of great jaws crunching the dead body of the snake. There was little, if any, flesh ever left to rot in the steaming jungles of this prehistoric age. Food was the greatest problem among the thriving animal life which roved in superabundant profusion through the plains and forests of this primeval era in the earth's progress, and the larger animals ate the smaller animals who subsisted on the riot of vegetation, the former in turn being preyed on upon by still larger meat-eaters. It was a survival of the fittest where nimble feet, quick wits and sharp senses were the greatest assets if longevity were to be cherished.

Thrag had also fallen beneath the rush of a large cave bear, his stone knife drinking deep from the vitals of the furry monster

as it pinioned him beneath its great body after he had checked its first advance by a well directed throw of his stone hatchet. Pinned beneath the dying beast from whose terrible claws fate had destined him to be saved, Thrag had found it necessary to cut his way out from under the great body whose massive bulk he had been unable to shove from off him, even though his mighty thews and muscles were of the strongest among the ranks of the Cliff Dwellers. Then later, a mad dash for a protecting tree had seen him elude by only a hair's breadth the infuriated charge of one of the nearly extinct saurians, a few of which still existed in gradually diminishing numbers. Had Thrag been fully on the alert and unburdened by his sorrow and remorse, he would have heard, seen or smelled these terrifying creatures, and could have discreetly avoided them as was his usual habit.

And so it was, lost in deep thought and reckless abandon for the life which now held but little for him, he remained unconscious of the fact that through the forest behind him there crept death in the form of a saber-toothed tiger, the undulating muscles rippling gently beneath the beautiful skin of the cat.

Suddenly, the great feline chose to spring, sneaking out into the opening, with belly to the ground,

its yellow-green eyes blazing. It prepared to gather its hind feet for the impetus which would hurl it upon its unsuspecting victim, expanding its lungs for the terrifying scream intended to freeze its quarry into a split second of immobility. But the cave man was not to be taken wholly unawares, and the snapping of a fallen tree-branch beneath the feet of the approaching cat warned him of the impending danger. As the cat sprang with a horrid mouth-ing, Thrag leaped aside like lightning, aiming a vicious blow at the sabre-toothed monster, which rushed by him in the air with outspread claws, converting the terrible animal into a raging ball of fury incarnate, as it threshed about upon the ground for a moment, tearing at the stone knife which protruded from its side. Angry screams and howls set the air to ringing with the terrible cries of the enraged cat.

To live was to act, and Thrag had leaped close in to the infuriated animal at the moment it landed, crashing his stone axe down upon the head of the striped terror with all the force of his powerful arm. As the body of the cat stiffened from the effects of the numbing, crushing blow, the cave man leaped in and made death double assured for the great feline, who had sought his life. Pulling forth his stone knife from the body of the dying



animal he plunged it again and again through the sleek fur which covered the heart of his sabre-toothed adversary.

Thrag continued onward, and now took notice that the sun was beginning to sink as a dull red ball down beneath the horizon. To travel by day was fully hazardous enough, but to wander among the numerous prowling horrors by night was a wanton invitation of suicide. The cave man, for the past three nights, had slept in tree crotches, but such a repose was not only uncomfortable but dangerous as well, and his encounter with the snake had not increased his preference for such an aerial bed-chamber. Only that morning, he had perceived a lonely cave far up on the cliff-side, and upon investigation had found it uninhabited and suitable to his needs. So with the approach of evening tide, the shadow of dusk's twilight mantle enshrouding the landscape, Thrag turned his steps in the direction of the cliff to seek rest until on the morrow the sun's flaming, incandescent mass should rise once more above the horizon, throwing into elongated relief the early morning shadows.

As the cave-man reached the foot of the towering declivity and began his nimble ascent of the nearly sheer face of the precipice towards a dark cave's mouth just

below the summit, the dying glow of sunset spread its golden effulgence across the western sky. The evening star appeared from out a blue, twilight sky to look down upon the wild, untamed life of the prehistoric forest. Up, ever upward, Thrag, the cave man, quickly ascended, scaling the high cliff in almost no time, his well proportioned body disappearing within the cave's mouth.

Night passed, and Thrag slept soundly while a gibbous moon sailed majestically across the night sky, its silver surface suffusing the earth with a pale, ghostly, ethereal light. Up from the jungle arose roars, screams, coughs and a variety of other unclassified noises as the great beasts roamed in search of food. Fierce conflicts took place, and while the victor hungrily devoured the still warm remains of his late adversary, he was likely to be attacked and slain by a more fearsome creature who would then greedily bolt both carcasses. Life was cheap, and death a common occurrence.

## Chapter II Aboard the Space Ship

When Thrag awoke, the morning sun cast a rosy glow within the interior of his cave. He stretched and yawned, flexing his long-cramped muscles in the revelry of early morning exuber-



ance. He yawned again, and then arose to his feet and walked to the mouth of his cave. From this eminence, he could gaze far away into the blue haze of distance. Below him, the tangled mass of the jungle crept up to the foot of the cliff, while far away beyond it, the dotted plain dwindled away into the horizon. Just within his limits of vision, merging into the sky, there lay the distant sea whose waters teemed, literally alive with the superabundance of marine life which flourished beneath the hot swollen sun. The remote waters of the sea reflected the early morning sunshine, the burnished surface of the water throwing back a dazzling flicker as the warm breeze excited into movement the rippling waves and white caps.

Thrag was hungry. Very good, then he would eat. But first he must hunt. He gathered up his two weapons, the stone knife and stone axe, without which he would have felt comparatively helpless, the latter weapon being bound to its handle by raw hide throngs. Rapidly, he began his descent of the cliff face, and, when but halfway down, he discovered a ledge which ran out of sight around a bend of the rocky wall. Being of a curious, exploring nature, Thrag wondered where it led. Perhaps he should find a cave at the other end, a much better one than that in which he had spent the night. Anyway his curiosity was

piqued, and he would investigate, so he hopped nimbly down upon the ledge from where he was clinging to a jutting outcrop of rock, and proceeded to follow it along the cliff's face.

It led onward for a considerable distance, and as he continued, Thrag noticed that the cliff was becoming more nearly perpendicular, and its sheerness entirely devoid of irregularities, and he observed that if he were to climb either up or down, it would be necessary to return to the spot where he had gained access to the ledge. Finally the ledge ended abruptly, narrowing off to join the smooth face of the cliff.

There was no cave, and having satisfied his curiosity Thrag turned and retraced his steps. He halted suddenly as a terrifying roar shook the air with its vibrations. Ahead of him, barring him from further progress, stood a great, shaggy cave-bear which glared at him menacingly, with the ugly, yellow fangs showing, and snarling at the puny man who stood before his towering bulk. The bear was hunting his breakfast, and was exceedingly hungry in view of the fact that it had been nearly twenty-four hours since food had passed his ravenous maw. He was in ill humor. Then Thrag had dropped down upon the ledge, the animal had been just around the bend in the direction opposite to that ta-

ken by the man, and hearing the troglodyte, had stalked him, the man unaware of the beast's presence until he had turned to go back.

The cave bear roared angrily once more and, rearing upon his hind legs with massive paws upraised to rush down upon the man, prepared to make his kill and fill his stomach. Behind Thrag, the ledge ended against the cliff's face; above the below him there extended the smooth surfaces of the declivity; while before him stood a hungry, infuriated engine of destruction, bent on annihilating him without further delay. Resolutely, the cave man gripped his axe securely, while he loosed the long stone knife from his girdle, awaiting the charge of the cave bear. With a series of frightful roars, the animal charged down upon the primitive man, who with all his might hurled the heavy stone axe at the head of the approaching monster, who roared horribly in pain as the weapon struck his shoulder a glancing blow, the hatchet ricocheting across the side of the cliff, bounding over the ledge to the forest below.

As the troglodyte struck a savage blow at the huge animal with his stone knife, a terrible sweep of the creature's paw sent it spinning from the hand of the cave man completely disarming him and leaving him to the mercy of

the beast. The man leaped briskly out of the way, and ran to the termination of the narrow ledge, the bear, after his first rush, advancing more slowly but none the less surely. Desperately, the man sought a hand hold or foothold which would allow him an escape from the dreadful beast, but the bare walls of the precipice extending both upward and downward mocked him. He was trapped!

Should he leap to death from the ledge in preference to the crushing jaws and tearing talons of the cave bear, or should he die at the attack of the great animal and be devoured? In the last few seconds remaining to his earthly existence the brave troglodyte wondered vaguely which was the more terrible death. A huge shadowy form drifted down through the air toward the ledge. Thrag catching an elusive glimpse of it out of the tail of his eye, as his gaze rested in rapt fascination upon the cave bear who was preparing for the final charge. One of the flying reptiles, mused Thrag. Doubtless the great pterodactyl and the shaggy cave bear would battle over his carcass. As the bear raised himself for the last rush, the cave man froze up close to the face of the cliff at the very end of the ledge.

In the depths of space between the earth and its contemporary planet, known to present day man

as Mars, a small space ship sped at an inconceivable speed across the millions of miles of space towards the earth. It was now very close, having been upon its journey through the stellar void for the period of time in which it had taken the great globe it was approaching to turn upon its axis forty times. Forty times the topographical features of the planet earth had swung lazily before the eager eyes of the two space navigators within their interstellar craft as day by day, according to the rotation of the cosmic sphere, the planet grew larger in proportion as they drew near.

The two Martians were six feet in height with large heads, and six limbs, two of the latter being used for locomotion while the other four ranged *midway* of the body were used as arms and hands. Lidless eyes and a pair of holes for nostrils set between the eyes and circular mouth marked the creatures' brown faces, while instead of a growth of hair, there arose from their heads some eight or ten short, waving tentacles which possessed the faculty of distinguishing sound, the heads of inhabitants of the red planet being entirely devoid of ears.

"We are nearly there, Sendalk!" spoke one of them, looking dramatically through the transparent side of the space ship towards the huge world which lay before them. "Our great adventure is

laying in wait there before us!"

"It has already been a great adventure, Drigab," replied the other. "For countless years, our people have dreamed of flying through space, and now you and I, the first space navigators, have realized that ambition."

"I wonder what we shall find? Will there be men like us?"

"Possibly."

"But not probably."

"We shall find all kinds of queer life upon the planet Wroaad, for our scientists claim that conditions there are such as would facilitate and encourage life to a large extent. It is nearer the sun, and has a dense atmosphere."

"Which is much unlike our own planet Nime," remarked Drigab.

"We shall have to be prepared to fight fearsome beasts I feel sure," prophesied Sendalk.

"There is no worry on that score. We are prepared."

"Yes."

"What have you decided to do in regard to Dracom, the revolving moon of Wroaad?" queried Drigab, a moment later. "Shall we land on that first, or wait until we have visited Wroaad?"

"We were to land upon the one nearest Nime for convenience of time if you remember our intentions when we embarked. Dracom is now nearer for the time of our arrival and we shall visit that first."

"It's diameter is but half of that

of our distant home world, Nime."

"While Nime's diameter is but half of that of Wroaad."

"Which means that we shall be much lighter upon the satellite than upon our planet Nime, and much heavier upon the planet Wroaad."

"Our gravity nullifiers will take care of us while we walk on Wroaad, and the intensifiers will be used on its moon."

"I hope we make a good landing," observed Drigab, a worried look creasing his brow.

"There is nothing to fear," assured Sendalk. "Didn't our three trial expeditions to the two moons of our own planet prove our craft's spaceworthiness?"

"Yes," admitted Drigab. "But Wroaad is so much larger."

"That matters nothing," replied Sendalk. "If this expedition is a success, we shall fly across space to the little worlds clustered together the other side of Nime, and then on to the giant planet of Vuge."

"We are not yet back from our trip to Wroaad," reminded Drigab. "I should like to visit the next planet nearer the sun rather than risk being drawn down by the gigantic world of Vuge."

"You mean Stlea?" asked Sendalik.

"Yes."

"We shall visit that too, but not on this trip. It is continually covered by clouds, even more so

than almost concealed Wroaad."

"Then there is the tiny inner planet next the sun."

"Which is too hot to approach."

"And then too, we might be drawn into the sun."

### Chapter III

#### From Moon to Earth

The ship of the cosmic void kept on through the eternal blackness of space studied with its galaxy of scintillating stars, and headed for the huge moon whose shining crescent loomed up before them. Several hours later they carefully lowered their interplanetary flyer upon the surface of Wroaad's satellite.

"It has a very thin atmosphere," remarked Sendalk.

"Which in the course of thousands of years from now will waste completely away," added Drigab, "leaving it a cold, dead, lifeless moon."

"I wonder if it is not lifeless now," ruminated Sendalik. "There appears to be scarcely enough air for any living animal to breathe."

"A very low type of vegetation seems to flourish, and it is a universal axiom generally accepted by our scientists that plant life and animal life do not thrive separately," reminded Drigab. "Shall we emerge from our flyer?"

"Yes, we may as well," answered Sendalk, "but we shall don our

space suits, for this air is much too rare for our lungs."

Eager to explore the satellite's dismal surface, the two Martians put on their space suits and helmets, and after adjusting their gravity intensifiers, left the cosmic flyer by means of the air lock, stepping forth upon the lonesome appearing Dracom.

"How weird it is," observed Sendalk in awe, waving his four arms at the sky. "You can see the sun and a few of the stars both at the same time."

"Somehow or other, it all looks sadly beautiful," said Dribag. "But I certainly wouldn't want to live here. It is rather depressing."

Together, the two climbed a rise toward a crater hole whose outer slope loomed above them.

"We must not go very far away from the space ship," warned Drigab. "I feel as if there were many eyes watching us from hidden places."

"We'll not go out of sight of it," said Sendalk.

"Look!" ejaculated Drigab excitedly as the two topped the rise which marked the rim of the moon crater.

From out of the moon pit there arose four thin fuzzy animals on wings. They were the strangest creatures the Martians had ever seen, representing a cross between a bird and a land animal, the long, scraggly, blue-furred body being equipped with a set

of long wings for flight as well as four appendages for walking. The four moon birds arose above the crater, their wings flapping dismally as they viewed these intruders from out of space. The Martians stared in surprise at these inhabitants of the satellite they knew as Dracom. The winged creatures emitted long, shrieking wails as they circled over the place, watching the two Martians who stood silent upon the lip of the lunar crater.

"Shall I bring one of them down?" asked Drigab, raising the weapon he held.

"No," replied Sendalk. "We have come in peace, and our destroying light-thrower is to be used only as defense."

"I don't like the way they watch us so closely and screech at us," said Drigab disgustedly.

"Come," said Sendalk. "We shall pay them no attention and continue upon our exploration."

The two Martians spent a full day upon Dracom, exploring the satellite of Wroaad which careened nearly a quarter of a million miles off in space. The two visitors from another world visited various sections of the satellite in the space ship, and everywhere they went there grew the sparse vegetation of the dying satellite, and they were greeted by the weird shriekings of the bird folk. One type of animal, and one type of plant life was all that existed

upon the moon which thousands of years ago had seen a better life.

"All worlds come to this sooner or later," remarked Sendalk cryptically. "They must all die, even Nime."

"The larger the world, the longer they last, because a small world cools faster," said Drigab. "that is why this moon shall die out long before its mother planet begins to lose its heat to any great extent."

"Dracom cannot last much longer," said Sendalk as the two entered the space craft to bid the moon farewell and continue to the planet around which it swung. "It has very little water left—and that can be found only in the deepest craters."

Across the far flung boundaries of space the two Martians flew in their cosmic flyer, from the moon to earth. Soon they were hovering above the envelope of atmosphere surrounding the globe, ready for the descent to the surface of the great planet, Wroaad.

"Its color characteristic appears to be green," said Drigab.

"The vegetation," remarked Sendalk.

"Shall we find intelligent creatures?"

"I doubt it."

"Why?"

"Because Wroaad is larger than Nime and took longer to cool after being hurled out of the sun.

We are a couple of hundred thousand years in advance of them."

Down through the atmosphere towards the rapidly approaching planet, which rose up to meet them, the two Martians skillfully guided their space ship.

"What strange trees!" ejaculated Sendalk in surprise.

"And animals!" added Drigab, pointing excitedly to the tiny moving dots below them.

The two Martians were all eyes, for the wonders of their neighboring world riveted their attention, attracting them like a magnet. Nearer and nearer to the surface they dropped, and now they could perceive the details of the landscape and view more closely the teeming life of the world.

"Shall we land here?" asked Drigab.

"This place looks as good as any, though we shall have to be on our guard against the beasts. Some of them appear formidable. The ray will keep them off."

"Just the same we must not leave the space ship too long while we are exploring. Some of those ponderous creatures are as large as the ship itself, and can damage the outer equipment of our craft."

As the flyer of space settled towards the ground, Sendalk pointed with excited gesticulations towards a nearby cliff. Drigab followed his pointing arm.

"A creature like us!"

"No!"

"Yes!"

"He walks erect on two legs, but he has only two arms instead of four!"

"But his head somewhat resembles ours!"

"A beast is after him! See him run!"

"He is caught; he can go no farther!"

"We must save him!" exclaimed Drigab. "Quick! Shoot the ray upon the beast before it is too late!"

As the gigantic cave bear rushed down upon Thrag, its hideous roar rattling in his ear drums, there shot forth from the flying monster of the air a blinding ray of white light full upon the fearsome beast which, unable to halt its mad rush, plunged against the rocky wall beside the cave man, dead. The bird had killed the bear, thought Thrag, and now it was to carry him off. How he wished he still had his stone axe and knife. Approaching the inert mass of the cave bear, he watched the great bird.

How queer it behaved; never had he seen such a bird which could remain stationary so long in one spot. The flying colossus had no wings, and its body glinted strangely, reflecting the dazzling beams of sunlight. Where was the head with the grinning jaws and cavernous mouth ready to seize him? He had never seen such a

strange animal, and was sorely puzzled. Why didn't it attack him instead of halting motionless in the air to regard him so steadily?

From the space flyer, the two Martians looked the troglodyte over carefully, examining his strange body which bore such a distinct similarity to their own.

Seeing that the great bird made no move to attack him, apparently being no longer in the mood for battle after having so easily disposed of the cave bear, and without weapons, Thrag decided to attempt an escape. Slowly and warily he climbed over the carcass of his late adversary, keeping one eye upon the bird who continued to remain passive at this initial maneuver on the man's part. He crept along the ledge away from the creature of the air, and hastily beat a retreat. Thrag did not stop running until he was out of sight around the bend in the cliff where he had first gained access to the ledge, and from here he speedily descended to the foot of the towering precipice.

It was now that a human characteristic laid hold of Thrag. He was suddenly consumed with a curiosity to see what the strange bird would do. Never before had he seen such a wingless, headless denizen of the atmosphere which instantly killed its foes at a distance with a long, white arm, which shot out like lightning and then disappeared. Thrag did not



consider for a moment that the thing had purposely saved his life. All creatures killed either for food, for sport, or for self defense. The creature had not eaten him or the bear, nor had it killed the bear because it feared the animal. Then it must have killed the shaggy beast for sport. If so, why had it not killed him?

These were some of the thoughts which raced through the mind of the primitive man as he gained the protection of the forest. Rapidly, he proceeded back along the foot of the cliff to a position relative to the one where above on the ledge the cave bear had nearly terminated his wild life. Eagerly he sought a glimpse of the queer bird. It had flown. But no, there it drifted a short distance away from the spot where he had last seen it. The creature dropped slowly toward the ground in vertical descent.

Thrag, the cave man, now hunted for his weapons, and though he found the knife, the hatchet was irrevocably lost, and he wasted little time seeking it. He wanted to watch the bird. Stealing softly in the direction of the Martian space ship, he saw where it had come down in a clearing. Climbing a tree so that he might give his undivided attention to the great thing, instead of warily avoiding the carnivora of the jungle, he glued his eyes upon the gigantic bird which flew with-

out any sign of moving wings.

His eyes opened widely, and he nearly fell off the tree limb in amazement as he saw a part of the great bird open outward. The mouth, he surmised. If he had been surprised at the appearance of the opening, he was more astounded by what now took place.

From the mouth of the bird projected the head and shoulders of a man. But was it a man? Thrag gazed in awe at the brown countenanced Martian with his short tentacles growing upon the head where hair should have been. As the entire body of the space wanderer emerged from the cosmic flyer, Thrag's eyes went wide in amazement at the weird appearance of the physique of Sendalk with his four arms. How formidable those men must be, thought Thrag, for they could wield two stone axes and two knives at the same time. That he was some kind of a man Thrag felt certain, but never in all the annals of the tribe had anyone ever heard of, or seen, such a strange race as this man represented. Of course, there were the hairy ape people who lived in the trees, but they bore no resemblance to this individual.

Did this queer man live in the stomach of the great bird? Where had it come from? Some subconscious intuition told the cave man that the bird was not of the flesh and blood variety with which

he was familiar, but was a wonderful contrivance owned by the man who had stepped from out of it. A second head now appeared from the space ship and uttered a few sounds to the first who answered, and then the second head disappeared back within the interstellar craft.

#### Chapter IV Thrag to the Rescue

Sendalk the Martian, in view of the fact that the earth's dense atmosphere did not threaten him with asphyxiation like that of the moon, had emerged from the space flyer without the surface suit he had worn on the satellite of the planet. He now walked several hundred feet from the space ship, where he stopped and performed what was to the eyes of the watching cave man, queer antics. He commenced staggering and weaving with a sickening lurch, and then he was down upon his knees, apparently unable to rise, clawing at the green-sward with a despairing yell. He arose to his feet, and then toppled over, just as the second Martian emerged from the space flyer and started in the direction of his companion. The second Martian was no more than halfway there before he too lurched forward and stumbled. Instead of keeping on in the direction of Sendalk, Drigab discreetly turned back toward

the cosmic flyer from Mars, and half stumbling and running, his four arms swinging ludicrously, he made his uncertain way back to the aerial monster which had so piqued Thrag's curiosity. The last few feet saw Drigab crawling upon his hands and knees, and it was with a great effort that he gained the interior of the interplanetary craft, slamming the door behind him.

The inert body of Sendalk lay *face up* on the ground. What had happened, wondered Thrag? Why had the two strange creatures behaved so queerly?

Why didn't the first one arise?

The truth of the matter was this: the Martians had been overcome by barometric pressure and oxygen intoxication, the envelope of earth's atmosphere being thicker and denser than that of Mars to which the two explorers from another planet had been accustomed. Sendalk, upon leaving the flyer, had not noticed the difference at first until he was so far away from the space craft that it was impossible to get back, and his senses had reeled. He had yelled to Drigab just before consciousness left him, and Drigab realizing his plight, had made a desperate effort to rescue him. When halfway to his stricken companion, Drigab experienced the first dangerous sensations which had overcome Sendalk, making him dizzy and uncertain.

The Martian knew that he would never make it to his fallen comrade and back to the space flyer, let alone considering the added burden of Sendalk's helpless body.

He knew that if they were both overcome, death would claim them in this strange world, and he had run back to the space flyer just as fast as he could go, planning to maneuver the craft alongside of Sendalk and rescue him. He had arrived at the space flyer not one moment too soon, for as the door clanged shut behind him, he fell unconscious to the floor of the craft where he lay for nearly ten minutes before he came to his senses.

Thrag was an interested spectator to the scene, his sharp eyes taking in every detail of the strange drama enacted before him. And as he watched, so watched other eyes, evil eyes which glared hungrily at the helpless body of Sendalk. With grinning jaws, a long, slim body on short legs wriggled along the ground towards the unconscious Martian. The reptile would make short work of this strange creature that came out of the great bird, soliloquized Thrag as he watched with interest from his tree branch.

The disgusting monster, its glassy eyes staring in gluttonous anticipation at the prospective feast before it, continued an omi-

nous approach, the cavernous throat revealed as the great jaws flexed themselves in preparation. Something stabbed at Thrag's heart suddenly, and he felt that he must not let the terrible reptile eat the strange creature. Why should he feel so? Was not the unconscious man from the space ship just as much his enemy as another member of a neighboring tribe, or another animal? Didn't he always gloat over the destruction of an enemy? As the reptile crept slowly upon the helpless man, Thrag's mind became more and more troubled, and his conscience screamed at his adverse nature and instincts to save the Martian from death.

As the cave man impulsively obeyed the overwhelming urgings of his conscience, descending quickly to the ground across which he raced in an attempt to beat the horny skinned reptile to his prospective meal he realized what had prompted his desire to save the weird creature from the air monster. It had occurred to him that the two queer men in the great bird had but recently saved him from the cave bear.

The eyes of the reptile gleamed wickedly as he viewed the approaching interruption in the form of the primitive man who rushed down upon him with gleaming knife held aloft. The morning rays of the sun gleamed from the polished cavities where

the stone blade had been chipped. The reptile, now standing above the unconscious Sendalk, aimed a vicious snap at the caveman who eluded the terrible jaws nimbly and buried his stone knife in a low, upward swing against the belly of the animal which leaped and threshed about as the life blood gushed forth from the ragged puncture inflicted upon him by the indomitable Thrag. Fortune favored the cave man.

Again and again the primeval man leaped in and struck at the horrid creature whose snapping jaws were always a bit too late to close upon some portion of the cave man's anatomy. The reptile finally became too weak to fight and keeled over dead, though its tail still switched to and fro. Picking up the still form of Sendalk, Thrag bore it in the direction of the huge bird into which the other weird, man-like creature had disappeared.

The noise of conflict had attracted other animals of the jungle and they had watched curiously from hidden vantage points the fight between the cave man and the reptile, remaining silent observers with the exception of the little monkeys who danced, chattered, scolded and clapped their hands gleefully from nearby trees. And now from the surrounding foliage of the clearing, there broke into view a towering colossus whose wicked eyes

were directed upon the comparatively tiny cave man with his burden which he was transporting to the space flyer.

With a crashing of trees and brush foliage, a great dinosaur, a creature of an earlier age whose ranks were becoming fewer and fewer, strode out of the forest and ambled awkwardly, though swiftly, down upon the troglodyte. Thrag, glancing over his shoulder at the sound of the din and commotion of the creature's sudden break through the jungle, perceived the huge saurian in pursuit of him, and in his heart he felt a sinking sensation, and he broke into a run, for behind him was the most terrible animal in all the world, a creature which had never yet been slain in combat by a human individual!

Thrag sprinted toward the huge bird which loomed up closer, while behind him, shaking the ground with its rapid advance, the gigantic saurian, a fearful engine of destructive forces, was speedily closing up the distance between them. The serrated jaws at the extremity of the long neck were spread wide in advance of the rest of the body, ready to seize him. The caveman neared the spaceship, and the dinosaur was scarcely ten feet from the pursued, when from the Martian space flyer there burst forth a long shaft of intense light full upon the

great saurian. Without a sound, the hitherto invincible giant of an earlier age crashed to the earth a few feet behind the fleeing cave man. Once again, the terrible weapon of the Martians had sent death instantaneously to one of the fearsome beasts of earth's prehistoric era. Drigab had come to his senses just in time to witness the termination of Thrag's fight with the reptile in defense of Sendalk. He had prepared to move the space flyer to a position beside the cave man and Sendalk when the troglodyte had picked up the senseless Martian and had borne him in the direction of the space craft. Then the dinosaur had pursued them, and Drigab had turned the destroying ray full upon the terrible monster.

Now, Drigab opened the door in the space craft and took from the arms of the cave man the unconscious Sendalk. He motioned for Thrag to follow, and beckoned the cave man to enter the huge bird. Fearfully the troglodyte gazed into the hollow interior of the craft at the maze of machinery and intricate apparatus, and it was with hesitance and trepidation that he finally entered. But he clutched his bloody stone knife tightly, and slid inside with suspicious mien, gazing in awe at the fittings of the craft. While his heart beat at a wild excited pace never before preceded in his combats with

the carnivora of the prehistoric jungle and plain.

Drigab motioned him kindly to a seat, while he propped Sendalk in another. The Martian and troglodyte each examined one another carefully, Drigab noticing the varying peculiarities of the cave man's body, while Thrag regarded the Martian with a superstitious reverence.

Sendalk began to revive presently, and sat up straight, rubbing a hand across his forehead. To Thrag's ears there came a rapid jargon of unintelligible talk as Drigab explained to Sendalk how Thrag had saved the former's life.

The cave man began to pant and breathe forcibly as if after a long, exhausting run, and a weakness assailed him. Drigab gazed in sudden alarm at the cave man's actions and with sudden understanding reached for a lever.

"He can't stand our thin atmosphere any more than we can breathe his dense air," said Sendalk as Drigab pulled a lever which increased the air within the space craft to a quantity which would average between that of the earth and Mars, creating an atmosphere which could be breathed for a limited time by both Martian and troglodyte without either suffering from any ill effects.

"He is the one we saw upon the face of the cliff," said Drigab. "The creature is built much like

us. Yet seems quite alien."

"He is a bit lower in the scale of evolution, however," replied Sendalk, "but time will remedy that just as it did for our ancient forebears on the planet Nime.

"He is a brave man," remarked Drigab. "You should have seen him defeat the terrible animal who was about to devour you."

"We must repay him," replied Sendalk. "I wonder if he is speechless."

"Try him out," suggested Drigab.

After a few words in his own language with the supplement of various gesticulations, Sendalk pointed to himself, saying his name after which he pointed to Drigab and pronounced his name. He then pointed to the cave man in query, and the troglodyte, understanding, spoke his own name.

"Thrag!" he ejaculated, pointing to himself.

"He can talk!" exclaimed Sendalk, pleased with his efforts.

The cave man, enthused with the efforts of the two Martians to make him talk, followed up this initial speech with a guttural jabbering of sound pointing to the ceiling of the craft as well as to the various controls, and then at the dead saurian which lay out-side the space craft.

"Don't leave him in here too long," warned Drigab. "The atmosphere isn't of enough density for him, and is too dense for us."

"Let him out, and we'll go out with him."

"With our suits and helmets this time."

"Yes, I didn't realize the effects too much atmosphere would have upon us, and thought only of putting on our gravity nullifiers.

## Chapter V

### The "Kill Stick"

It took the Martians but little time to don their protective suits, and emerge with the caveman into the open. They went to where the enormous carcass of the saurian lay. Each of the Martians carried a long stick in his hand. They were examining the huge beast when a cry from the cave man aroused them.

Thrag pointed to a snarling saber-toothed tiger which, attracted by the odor of fresh killed meat had just arrived upon the scene. The cave man gripped his stone knife closely and gesticulated to the Martians to seek safety in their ship of space. On came the terrible creature, snarling and screaming at the three who stood their ground. Only the day before Thrag had killed one of the beasts, and now as he started forward to meet the huge cat in mortal combat, realizing they had tarried too long to run in safety from the feline, Drigab laid a restraining hand upon his arm.

Sendalk raised the long rod he

held and levelled it at the approaching saber-tooth. From the magic rod, Thrag witnessed the same shaft of white light which had previously killed the cave bear and then the mammoth saurian. The effects upon the great striped cat was remarkable. A puzzled look appeared on the cat's face, replacing the wrinkled visage designed to strike terror to all observers, and without a cry the saber-toothed terror fell dead. How wonderful it was, thought Thrag, to kill so easily. For several hours, the two Martians roamed among the terrible dangers of the forest with the troglodyte, and whenever any animal menaced their safety, he fell dead before the terrible rays of the two explorers from another world. They even taught Thrag how to operate the long sticks, and it was with immeasurable pride that Thrag brought down both a hairy mammoth and a prehistoric ox.

From the latter, Thrag cut a generous portion, offering the food to the Martians who were puzzled at this procedure, until seeing the cave man ate it, knew it to be food. The declined to eat the raw flesh, however, leaving Thrag to wonder whether or not these two ever found it necessary to feed their stomachs.

After several hours of wandering in the nearby vicinity of the space flyer, the Martians tired of the sport and with the cave-man,

who had spent an interesting period of time in their company, turned to the cosmic penetrator of the void between worlds.

Here, they offered to Thrag many wonderful articles and trinkets, but the cave man, though regarding them as marvelous, had different ideas, and had a particular motive in mind as he pointed at one of the "kill sticks," the name with which he had come to dub the ray ejectors.

"He wants one of the weapons," said Drigab to Sendalk. "Shall we give him one?"

"Yes, if you think it is safe to do so," replied Sendalk. "We have several more of them with us."

So it happened that the two Martians made a gift of one of the ray ejectors to Thrag, the cave man, the representative precursor of modern civilization by two hundred thousand years.

The cave-man had a particular reason for desiring the weapon. The sight of all the wild beasts falling before the invincible ray of light made to shine by merely squeezing a button had stimulated in his mind the vision of Nrok and his followers dropping to their death before that same ray, while undaunted he continued on to claim his beloved Tua. What a sweeping conquest, revenge and recovery of a lost love, he could bring within his power with the possession of the "kill stick!"



And so it was a delighted Thrag who hurried away from the space ship with his newly acquired toy and weapon to consummate the highest ideal of his ambitions, the winning back of Tua who sorrowfully bemoaned her fate in the cave of Nrok.

"I wonder if we shall ever see him again," mused Drigab as they watched Thrag disappear into the forest, waving a farewell to them.

"Probably, if we remain in this vicinity very long," said Sendalk.

"There must be a village of them somewhere around here.

"Doubtless."

"We shall visit it before we leave the vicinity."

"I'm afraid we cannot stay on Wrooad for more than three or four days," said Sendalk. "We have little more supplies than it will take to consume during our trip back through space to Nime, and we must not tarry too long here if we should ever see our own world again."

"We shall return at a later time?" queried Drigab.

"Most assuredly, bringing a larger number of supplies for a longer stay of exploration."

"What is our program for the next few days we stay here?"

"Nothing definite as yet. I believe we shall do a bit of exploring in this region, and then, prepare for our return to Nime."

Together, the two Martians en-

tered their space craft, removed their suits designed to protect them from the greater atmospheric pressure of the earth as well as the density of the respiratory medium, and composed themselves to rest after the long hours of tramping through the jungle with Thrag, the troglodyte.

And Thrag was joyously on his way to the village of Nrok from which he had been barred through the clever trickery of the new chief, and in his hands he clutched the "kill stick" with which he would send into oblivion all and everything opposed to the rescue of Tua, his mate. Frequently, he tested the qualities of the ray upon the various animals he encountered to assure himself that it was not a dream from which he would presently awaken once more into the grim reality of disappointment.

A hairy mammoth which suddenly interrupted him in his bee-line march towards the cliff dwellings fell before his onslaught, and from afar up in the top of a tree a brilliant plumed bird fell dead. He even turned it upon a hill of ants, everyone of the tiny, industrious workers falling dead. Satisfied that the "kill stick" was no myth and still retained its annihilating qualities, Thrag strode on boldly until late that afternoon he came to the white cliff where dwelt his native tribe.

Grun was the first to see him,

and warned him away, reminding him that he was exiled from the tribe for his recent perfidy, and that he could expect only death if he returned. Grun waved his stone hatchet menacingly. Thrag hesitated. Previously Grun and he had been staunch friends the two of them having hunted together as youths. The cave man had little desire to slay his friend with the "kill stick."

"I come not to harm Grun," remonstrated Thrag. "No one will die but Nrok. I have come for my Tua."

"Go away!" motioned Grun.

"Nrok will have you killed if he finds you here. Tua is Nrok's."

"Stand aside!" cried Thrag, waxing angry at Grun's stubborn attitude, when it was within Thrag's power to instantly kill his fellow cave-man. "I can kill you, if you don't!"

"I shall call the tribe, and we shall hunt you down and kill you like we would a bothersome animal if you don't go!" threatened Grun.

"I can kill them all with this," parried Thrag pointing triumphantly at the ray ejector he carried.

"What, with a stick?" queried the dubious Grun openly amused.

"Look!" exclaimed Thrag as he directed the rod in the direction of a small rodent a short distance away.

He pressed the button, and a

white glare of light beamed forth upon the little animal which immediately fell dead. The eyes of Grun stared excitedly from his head as he gazed in awe and mystification at the startling scene enacted before his eyes. With a muttering of syllables to the effect that Thrag had connived with the evil spirits of the wood, Grun ran up the side of the cliff and with a loud shouting brought heads projecting from nearly every cave in cliff side, disappeared within his own cave, convinced that Thrag was in league with sorcerers.

Up to the very foot of the cliff, Thrag boldly advanced underneath the surprised assemblage of heads which looked down upon him from the various cave entrances.

"I want my woman!" he cried. "I must fight Nrok who has wronged me, and then I shall be gone with my mate from your tribe forever! We too shall dwell together far away!"

"Go away!" shouted Zerg, Nrok's underchief. "Nrok is on a hunt with others of the tribe. I guard his women and none shall have Tua. We shall kill you!"

With these last words, Zerg sprang forth from the cave and began the descent, fully a dozen or more of the troglodytes following him from the other caves, all bent upon killing the audacious Thrag. The cave man waited for them

patiently at the foot of the declivity, and Zerg was the first to reach the ground before Thrag.

It was not Zerg's intentions, however, to engage Thrag alone, for the latter's prowess was too well known among the tribe for Zerg to risk his rascally neck in fair combat. Zerg awaited reinforcements which soon joined him, all the while threatening the cave-man, but making no motions to carry out his great boasts. With the arrival of the dozen or more troglodytes down the face of the cliff, Zerg urged them forward with fierce cries, joining them, though careful not to place himself too ostentatiously in the lead.

Thrag had the treacherous Zerg singled out and though the sub-chief had attempted to render himself inconspicuous in the rear, the avenging troglodyte had his eye upon him. As the cave men advanced, waving their stone hatchets and knives in accompaniment with weird cries, Thrag brought the weapon of the Martians into action. He pressed the button at the base and from the end of the rod the bright ray sprang forth full upon the countenance of Zerg and two of his companions who toppled over dead.

At this terrible manifestation of the stick in Thrag's hands the others fell back in surprise before the weapon they had expected Thrag to wield like a club, per-

haps clouting a few of them before the rest overpowered him. But the awful results attained by the mysterious light which burnt a hole in the daylight so astounded and terrorized them that they fled from the indomitable cave man as if he had been a plague.

"Go back!" urged Thrag, stepping across the three bodies of his fallen foes. "Go back, and I'll not kill you! I come to take Tua and depart in peace! Stand in my way and I shall kill you with this! I am the mightiest fighter in all the world now. Every living creature falls before me, even Owrd!"

The cave man referred to the great dinosaur as he patted the "kill stick" proudly. He had no desire to slay any more of his former companions than self-defense called for, because with the exceptions of the deceitful Nrok and such equally unprincipled underlings as Zerg, he bore them no enmity, realizing that it had been the schemings of the two aforementioned individuals which had brought about his downfall. As they all fell back to a respectful distance from his ray ejector, he rapidly scaled the cliff face to the opening where Zerg had emerged.

Zerg's insinuation that he was guarding Nrok's women until the chief returned had led Thrag to the conclusion that where he had found Zerg he would also find

Tua with Nrok's two women. As he burst into the cave and examined the huddled form of a frightened female in one corner, he gave an exclamation of disgust. She was Zerg's woman.

"Where is Tua?" he demanded of the shivering woman whose fear stricken eyes bulged at sight of the awful weapon with which Thrag has just killed her mate and two others of the cliff village.

"In the cave of Nrok—beneath the overhanging ledge," she replied in fear. "Nrok no longer lives in this cave—he gave it to Zerg!"

Thrag knew the cave to which she referred, and quickly he made his way across the face of the cliff to the other cave designated by the widow of Zerg. There he was greeted in open arms by his beloved Tua who embraced him and pressed her tear stained face against his.

"I knew you'd come!" she sobbed.

"Tua!" was all he could utter.

In the darker recesses of the cave, the other women of Nrok looked on, and now that Thrag and his woman were intent upon each other, the two mates of Nrok sneaked stealthily from the cave, fearing that the wrath of Thrag might fall upon their luckless heads.

"Come!" he said. "We must go!"

"Where?" she queried.

"By the shore of the far-off sea where we shall be alone. We shall find a cave, and there we'll dwell in seclusion for the rest of our lives, and I'll hunt for you, dearest. No one will be there to disturb our happiness or set others against us by lying words."

The cave man lifted his mate in his arms.

"We shall be happy," she murmured.

"I'll fight for you with the 'kill stick,'" said Thrag, pointing to the destructive weapon which lay at his feet.

"Where did you get it?" asked the cave man's mate. "It killed Zerg and the others like the great fire which strikes from the sky when it rains."

"Some queer men with four arms who flew inside a great bird gave it to me," he replied.

Tua gazed into his face questioningly, wondering if the great sickness of the mind had overcome Thrag.

The incredible story Thrag had told us was no more unbelievable than the weapon itself, whose action she had seen with her very own eyes.

"Let us begone," she said. "Nrok will soon return."

"I do not fear him!" growled Thrag, his brow darkening. "I do not fear anyone—or anything!"

Tua embraced her mate in a tight squeeze.

"I want to kill him! I want to

see him die!" hissed Thrag, his blood running hot.

A yell arose from below.

"What's that?" queried Tua in sudden fright.

Thrag stood his woman upon her feet once more and advanced to the cave entrance to discover the cause of the new commotion. As he looked down from the cave entrance, he saw fully two dozen of the cave men assembled below him, all pointing and gesticulating excitedly at the cave entrance where he stood. With them was Nrok. The hunting party had returned and the details concerning Thrag's sensational return were being graphically described to the chieftain.

"Nrok!" shouted Thrag gleefully over his shoulder to his mate. "Now I shall have my revenge upon him!"

The cave man picked up the ray ejector and walked back to the cave entrance where he could look down upon the gathering of the cliff dwellers. His savage heart beat exultantly as he methodically directed the weapon upon Nrok some fifty feet below him at the foot of the precipice.

Some of those who had been present when Zerg and the others had met their fate shouted warningly to the group of newly returned hunters to get out of sight of the death dealing weapon, but experience is the greatest teacher of all, and some peo-

ple never learn until their fingers are burnt. An incident of fate was to save Nrok, however, in spite of his foolhardy disregard of the warnings of those who had witnessed Thrag's newly acquired powers.

The hand of Thrag closed upon the knob of the ray ejector. No light flashed forth this time. What was the matter? Again he depressed the button, and still the killing flash did not manifest itself. Thrag gazed in surprise at the weapon he had been given by the Martians, examining it closely. Something had happened to it, and now upon inspection, the cave man saw that the blunt point of the weapon was missing. Evidently it had become knocked off against the rock in his hurried ascent of the cliff.

Thrag experienced a sinking sensation. They were trapped! He would sell his life dearly, however, and before he died he would see that Tua should go with him instead of falling once more into the clutches of Nrok.

He must not allow them to realize that the weapon had been rendered useless and perhaps he might bluff their way to safety. He yelled and shouted from the cave ledge, expounding the terrible, destructive qualities of the ray ejector, pointing to the inert bodies of the three cave men he had killed with it.

"Kill us with the magic stick,

then!" retorted the incredulous Nrok, who not for a moment entertained belief in the ray ejector's power to slay. "You can't do it; you lie!"

"Stand back!" cried Thrag, employing a last minute bluff. "I shall kill your whole tribe, if you don't!"

But his attempt at terrorizing Nrok and those who had not witnessed the death of the three troglodytes was in vain. They did not place belief in the wild assertions of those who had been present; evidently their eyes had been playing them tricks. Had Nrok and the rest of the hunting party been a witness to the peculiar deaths of Zerg and his two companions, Thrag's words might have reached their ears laden with portent, but they would not believe it, even though the corpses of three of their number attested to a strange death which had overcome them, Thrag's failure to exercise the boasted powers of the weapon not only confirmed their scepticism but shook the credulity of those who had actually seen Thrag's effective use of the "kill stick."

"His words are false!" howled Nrok. "Seize him, and we shall kill him!"

The cave men, emboldened by the failure of Thrag's "kill stick" to function and by Nrok's bellowing command, leaped up the side of the cliff to drag the outlawed

troglodyte from his cave and put him to death, according to the edicts of the Cliff Dwellers who meted out such a fate to those who were exiled and then returned. Up the face of the declivity they nimbly ascended while at the cave's entrance, Thrag stood, his mate behind him.

"Do not harm Tua!" bawled Nrok to his men.

When the troglodytes were halfway to the cave's mouth before which Thrag stood on a narrow ledge, the cave man took a large rock and heaved it down upon them. It hit the hand of the foremost attacker just as the fingers clutched a polished knob of rock in the cliff face, crushing the fingers of the troglodyte who, with a howl of pain, released his hold and fell back upon his fellows. They all tumbled ungainly down the steep slope which characterized the lower half of the declivity in which the tribe had made its home for countless generations of innumerable ancestry. Nrok fumed and raged at this act, and wrathfully urged on his followers with all kinds of threats and promises.

"They will kill us!" shuddered Tua, hovering close beside her mate who stood ready with a heavy rock balanced on the palms of his hands outstretched above his head. "I shall die with you rather than belong to Nrok!"

"I shall fight to the last!" swore Thrag.

"Can we escape?" she asked.

Thrag shook his head sadly as he saw below him the menacing cave dwellers headed by Nrok, while above their cave lay twenty feet of smooth, insurmountable cliff's face to the summit of the precipice. Theirs was the only cave upon this level.

"Come down, or we shall kill you!" ordered Nrok, imperatively. "Come down!"

"And be killed at once!" remarked Thrag.

"Perhaps not, if you give up the woman and leave forever," argued Nrok.

"I'd give her to the saber-tooth first," replied Thrag. "Rather would she have one of the hairy tree men for a mate than you!"

This last epithet enraged Nrok so greatly that he stamped up and down, shrieking commands to his men to capture the dauntless two. Warily, the troglodytes approached the cliff's base, but immediately scrambled out of harm's way, as Thrag lifted the heavy rock in a menacing attitude.

"Let Thrag and Tua leave your tribe peacefully," suggested Thrag. "We shall find a new home."

"Never!" howled Nrok. "The woman is mine!"

"She'll die first!" spoke Thrag with vehemence.

"Not if I have your heart cut

out!" yelled Nrok in a rage.

"I'll meet you in fair combat upon this ledge," offered Thrag. "And to the winner goes the woman."

"We'll fight down here," insisted Nrok. "Come down."

"No," replied Thrag, distrusting the unscrupulous tribal chief, "we shall fight up here—with the rest of the men standing at a distance."

"Why should I fight for that which I can take," boasted Nrok. "To the top of the cliff; throw rocks down upon him just as he did to you!"

With alacrity, the members of the tribe obeyed, reaching by circuitous route a point above the cave in which Thrag and his mate were trapped.

"Inside!" ordered Thrag. "Quick!"

The had no more than disappeared within the opening of the cliff's face before great rocks hurtled down from above, pulverizing small pieces of the declivity where they struck. This was kept up for only a short time, and then there came an ominous cessation in which Nrok and his followers waited for Thrag to project his head from the opening. The troglodyte, warning Tua to remain in the safety of the cave's depth, proceeded cautiously to the opening where he could look down, the still be within the cave out of range of those above.



As he peered forth, a heavy stone axe came hurtling up from below, smashing against the interior of the cave a short distance from his head. He must be careful. At least, he now had a weapon.

For the next half hour comparative silence reigned, but Thrag knew that on the summit above the cave several of the troglodytes had heavy stones poised on the edge of the cliff ready to crush him to death should he emerge upon the ledge before the cave. Suddenly, a shadow blotted the entrance, and Thrag, who had retreated to the back of the cave with his mate to be out of reach from what objects the cave men might hurl into the opening, in a nervous hurry to investi-

upon the ledge stood two dwellers who had sneaked noiselessly up the face of the precipice while it had been guarded from above against Thrag's hurling more stones down upon them. Their eyes, unaccustomed to the gloom of the cave's interior, did not see the furious rush of the cave man until he was upon them. As Thrag grappled with one of them, a vicious swing of the other's axe laid open a wicked gash upon his head, and then he was down upon the floor of the cave rolling over and over with his adversary. The remaining troglodyte sought an opening whereby he might crash

his weapon down upon the head of Thrag without danger of injury to his comrade. The two combatants moved about with such rapidity that, being so closely locked in one another's embrace, the other cave man had little opportunity to get in the death dealing blow, or at least one which would stun the troglodyte, they were fighting.

Presently, the two became wrapped in a deadlock upon the floor of the cave, and the invader, with the stone axe raised menacingly, prepared to crash it down upon Thrag's head. Just as the bulky weapon ascended over the head of the exiled cave man, something clung to the up-raised arm from behind. The terrible blow did not descend, for Tua, creeping up from the rear, had seized the arm of the troglodyte at the precise moment, blocking the consummation of the man's intentions.

He attempted to shake her off, but like a leech she clung desperately to him, while on the floor her mate battled with the other cave-dweller. Hope died in the girl's heart as she saw other shadows darken the threshold of the cave. She heard the voice of Nrok.

"Grab him—hold him fast! Don't kill him—we have something better for Thrag!" . . . ordered Nrok as he and several more joined their two comrades

in the cave. "Don't let the woman get away!"

## Chapter VII The Ravaging Ants

Thrag was overcome by superior numbers. His attempt to rescue Tua had failed, and now death stared him in the face, and an existence worse than death confronted Tua. He was bound with strong, thongs cut from the hides of animals. The helpless troglodyte was carried down the cliff face by several of the Cliff Dwellers who secured him to a thick post drive deep into the ground. Tua was placed in a cave under a strong guard.

Nrok came to taunt the man, outling his fate, and graphically describing what was to happen to Tua, his mate. Trag's taciturn expression underwent no change, and so Nrok, tiring of the sport gave the helpless man a few savage kicks and left him.

All night he stood bound to the stake, being watched by a sleepy guard who kept the ring of watch fires burning, protecting them from the prowling beasts, who feared the flame and smoke.

Through the long hours of the prehistoric night, Thrag stood awake, gazing up at the brilliant, twinkling lights studding the black sky as they moved across the nocturnal heavens from the pursuing dawn whose gray, misty

fingers proclaimed early morning. Then would the flaming sun arise from its cave in the east. Thrag saw the ghostly flush of the drab and melancholy suffusion of light assume a brighter aspect as the world arose from its slumbers and the sun peeped over the horizon.

Before the dying embers of the fires reclined the slumped form of the guard and tender of the fires who had yielded to the arms of Morpheus. Thrag strained at his bonds; it was no use, for they held like iron. As the sun spread its beautiful reflection into the caves of the precipice which faced eastward, the cliff colony arose to its morning duties. They were up early this day, for had not Nrok promised them a rare hunt in the manner of Thrag?

And so Nrok and his brothers of the tribe had gathered and all to view the death Nrok had in mind for his captive.

"What are we going to do with him?" asked one troglodyte curiously.

"Wait and see," replied Nrok mysteriously.

"Stone him to death!" came the suggestion.

"My plan is better," said Nrok.

"Are you going to tie him up and hang him by the heels at the forest's edge for some wild beast to breakfast on?" queried another.

"Your idea is a good one," re-

plied Nrok appreciatively. "But I have a still better one."

"Burn him?"

"No."

"Feed him the bitter weed which tortures one in the stomach before he curls up and dies?"

"No," repeated Nrok, enjoying the mystery of the situation immensely as the Cliff Dwellers crowded around him, questioning his intentions concerning the disposition of the prisoner on whom Nrok had vented his vengeful spite.

"I'd give him to the hairy men of the forest to tear apart," suggested one.

"You are all poor guessers," announced Nrok, grinning at the bound man in evil anticipation. "Besides other wrongs perpetrated against us, he has killed three of our number. For that he must die a horrible, lingering death. What do you say?"

A loud, enthusiastic roar of approval arose from the ranks of the primitive men.

"Pull the stake to which he is bound from the ground," directed Nrok to four or five of the Cliff Dwellers, "and follow me."

They did as they were directed, the combined efforts of the cave men pulling from the earth the stake to which Thrag was bound. They carried the pole with the victim on their shoulders. Behind Nrok they walked, followed by the rest of the tribe who crowd-

ed around them, chattering excitedly. Whatever way he felt inwardly—Tharg did not betray, but put on an impassive front, even though he knew a terrible fate lay in store for him.

They walked but a short distance from the cliff and stopped near the edge of the dark jungle into which many of the troglodytes peered fearfully. No one was ever in the habit of venturing into it alone. When they entered the jungle, it was in the company of many, such as the hunting party Nrok and his men had comprised at the time of Throag's return to the tribe.

"Stop here!" commanded Nrok.

The cavalcade halted at the chief's order, wondering interestedly what next he would bid them do.

He pointed to the largest of several green mounds of earth.

"Shove the stake in there," he directed.

"The ants!" yelled the tribal members in exultant unison.

So this was the selected fate Nrok had in mind for Thrag, one of the most hellish tortures conceived by man, the process of being slowly bitten and eaten up by the horde of hungry avengers, who would cover the luckless troglodyte until he was a black, swarming mass.

The intrepid caveman, though he much preferred death at the hands of a sabre tooth or some

other equally ferocious creature, never qualmed a bit as the horrible realization of his quickly impending doom smote his mind as he heard the cries of the tribe.

"The ants!"

Two of the cave dwellers drove the stake upright into the spongy interior of the ant hill while the rest stood by to watch the annihilation of the outlawed troglodyte. Cries and jeers were directed upon him, the mob impulse of savage man overcoming their other instincts. He paid them no attention, denying them the delight of seeing him suffer.

For a time nothing occurred, and then from the ragged hole torn by the stake, a single, black ant scampered out over the protruding stake until he came in contact with the man. Here he stopped and investigated a moment, and then hurrying down the stake he disappeared within the hill once more. It seemed that the tiny creature had hardly ducked out of sight before once more he returned, this time with several companions who crawled inquisitively over the body of Thrag, the cave man, bound helplessly to the stake. The muscles of his leg twitched involuntarily as one of the tiny insects sank his mandibles into the yielding flesh of his limb.

A yell of derision greeted this movement, and a howl of laughter arose as a tiny trickle of blood

oozed from the small wound. The insects increased in number as more emerged from the hill, ran up the pole and upon the doomed man.

Jabs of pain shot through his lower limbs, feeling like points of fire as the ravenous ants bit him in numerous spots upon the lower sections of his anatomy. More of them were coming to join those already there, and soon the ant hill's immense population would swarm over him and he would be devoured in a surprisingly short time, his clean picked bones attesting to the fact that a human being had fallen prey to the ants. Those now upon him were but the vanguard of the destroying horde which was to come.

He glanced downward. His feet and legs were spotted with the tiny, black devils, and now from the many entrance ways to the ant city there poured forth several dark, orderly streams of the insects. He was glad they were coming so soon in such large numbers—it would be over quicker.

Sharp, excruciating prickings all over his legs made them feel as if they were afire, and it was with great will power that he refrained from wildly threshing his body about within his bonds. Such a procedure would in no whit alleviate the pain of suffering or shake off the clinging, biting ants,

and would only provoke to greater laughter and delight the watching troglodytes, who exulted in the morbid pleasure of seeing a fellow man die in such a horrible manner.

His thoughts were not of himself, but of Tua. What would happen to her? How he would like to get his hands around Nrok's villainous neck. His fingers tightened. Tua would doubtless seek the first opportunity of eluding Nrok by the only method of escape left open to her—death! He now commenced feeling the fiery bites around his hips. He looked down. His feet were nearly covered with the terrible insects which were piling over one another in their eagerness to be at him. He shut his eyes.

A loud cry arose from the ranks of the Cliff Dwellers who were the interested spectators of the scene. Doubtless one of the carnivorous beasts of the dense forest had sought the opportunity to spring among the troglodytes for its early morning meal. Thrag wished that it would spring upon him and end his misery. No, on second thought he would be glad to endure the pain if it would seize Nrok. He opened his eyes.

Thrag gasped in astonishment at the unexpected sight which greeted his eyes! There above him floated the great bird in which dwelt the two weird men who had given him the "kill

stick!" Had they come to save him again?

The troglodytes were pointing at the bird and gesticulating in alarm as with wild cries they ran from the path of the huge monster which dropped in their midst. His strange friends would have to hurry, thought Thrag, if they were to save him, for already the hungry insects were waist high, and creeping up around his armpits. The pain was intense, Thrag gritted his teeth. The cave-men had all disappeared in terror when the Martian space ship had landed among them, scattering to their cliff retreats from which they peered fearfully back upon the great wingless bird.

Cruising over the cliff, seeking new sights of the strange world they had come to visit, Sendalk and Drigab had perceived the assemblage of troglodytes from the cliff colony and had dropped lower to investigate. Through the telescope, Drigab had recognized Thrag, and immediately they had perceived his plight, and they were dropping among the bulging ant hills to rescue the cave man the second time from the jaws of death.

The door of the space ship opened, and the two Martians sprang forth. Drigab cut his bonds with some sharp instrument he held in his hand, while Sendalk slapped and brushed off the in-

sects from the cave man as best he could. They clung, and two of the ants appeared to take the place of every one brushed off. The cave man's muscles were now so cramped and inactive that he could hardly stand upon his feet. Sendalk spoke something to Drigab and then disappeared within the space craft, the latter now brushing the hungry horde of insects from the suffering Thrag. Sendalk appeared with a bulky instrument he carried in his hands which he held up before Thrag. A blue light sprang forth to envelope the cave man's body in a misty haze, producing a startling effect. Every one of the myriad of tiny black ants dropped off from his body and scampered madly into their hill to escape the blue light.

As the light of the Martians struck him, Thrag was conscious of a burning feeling, but it was not an unpleasant sensation. Looking down, he saw with surprise that the thousands of biting ants were rapidly dropping from his body under the glare of the blue light. When the last one had disappeared, Sendalk motioned for Thrag to enter the space craft. The two Martians followed the troglodyte within, and immediately donned their protective suits and helmets for already they were becoming dizzy from the temporary exposure to the earth's denser atmosphere.

Drigab took a jar of some liquid from a receptacle in the space craft and bathed the tortured lower limbs of the cave man. The liquid had a soothing effect upon the bitten flesh, which was covered with a welter of blood, and eventually the cave man was conscious of no pain at all, so great were the healing qualities of the liquid.

As the circulation of his arms and legs returned to normal once more, after having been released from the bonds which had held him a prisoner to the post since the previous evening following his capture, the cave man arose from his seat within the space flyer, and by gesticulation made it known to the two Martians that he was in a hurry to leave the craft.

They opened the door in compliance with his pantomimic request, and he stepped forth, running in the direction of the cliff where the rest of the troglodytes had taken refuge. Curiously, they left the space craft too, and followed. Thrag ran unhesitatingly to the cliff face up which he scrambled to the cave of Nrok. The Martians stopped at the base of the precipice. Thrag found the cave of Nrok empty.

"Where is Nrok?" demanded the troglodyte of one of his fellow cave men he found in a cave below that of Nrok's.

"He fled that way—into the

wood!" exclaimed the frightened man, viewing Thrag in awe after he had seen with his very eyes the troglodyte hobnobbing with these strange creatures who flew in a weird-looking wingless bird.

"Where is Tua?" asked Thrag.

"Nrok took her with him to escape the terrible bird from the sky!" came the frightened answer.

A multitude of conflicting thoughts ran through the mind of the man. Nrok had disappeared in the forest to the north!

He must follow at once! Could he find them? He clenched his fist as he realized he would comb the entire forest for his mate, and for the added tidbit of pleasure to be derived from killing Nrok! Then in a flash a magnificent plan struck him!

### Chapter VIII Cave Man and Mate

He hurried back down to where the two Martians awaited him at the foot of the cliff, after having appropriated a stone axe and knife from the cave man he had questioned. Eagerly, he chattered and motioned to the perplexed visitors from another planet. They shook their heads in puzzlement.

"What does he want, I wonder?" mused Sendalk.

"I don't know," replied Dri-

gab, "but it is evident he is very excited over something."

Thrag ran into a nearby cave and came back leading a protesting woman. He pointed to her, and then to himself, and then to the forest several times, finally allowing the frightened woman to return to her cave once more. He continued to point and make motions in the direction of the forest, and now he urged the puzzled Martians back to the space ship. Presently it dawned upon their minds what the troglodyte was trying to impress upon them.

"He has lost his mate!" exclaimed Sendalk.

"She is in the forest!" added Drigab, piecing together the information Thrag had attempted to convey them by pantomime.

"He wants us to help him find her!" said Sendalk, as Thrag led them back to the space craft.

The two Martians made it evident that they understood him, and the three entered the space craft, Drigab closing the door behind them. Thrag was to experience the greatest thrill ever to be accorded a cave dweller as the space ship arose above the trees, slowly rising past the cliff in whose caves huddled the frightened troglodytes. A wave of exultation and exuberance swept over Thrag, the cave man, as he gazed down at the cliff top from the interior of the metal bird. But he had more ser-



ious business at hand than the first joyful sensations of riding through the air, and as the space ship swung far above the jungle, he joined the two Martians in an eager exploration of the expanse of vegetation below them.

Thrag knew that Nrok would not remain in the terrible jungle for long, but would seek the broad clearing in the great forest which existed a short distance of some half mile north of the rugged cliff. And as they neared the great clearing, Thrag's eagle eyes examined closely every moving animal below him. Presently he gave a cry of discovery as he pointed down upon two tiny figures.

Drigab followed the pointing finger with the lens of a double barreled telescope, and then handed the instrument to the caveman. As Thrag gazed through the optical medium he experienced the greatest shock in his career. Nrok and Tua stood right before him! Nrok was dragging Tua by the hair as she strove to escape his grasp; hanging back, reluctant to continue. They were so close that Thrag could see the beads of sweat standing out on Nrok's hateful countenance.

Thrag pulled the glass from his eyes to make a grab for Nrok, but all he clutched was the empty air of the space ship as the craft flew far above the jungle. Below them, in the clearing were the two tiny, human dots. Thrag was at

a loss to explain the phenomenon, realizing that by some mysterious means he had been transported for the short time he looked through the glass to the clearing below.

But he had little thoughts concerning the mystery of the telescope. He wanted to be down in the clearing where he might be at the throat of the man who had wronged both him and his mate, and rescue from the rascally Nrok's hands his beloved Tua. He excitedly urged them to descend.

"That male down there killed his mate," said Sendalk icantly.

"I wonder why they had bound for the ants to eat," queried Drigab.

"We shall probably never know," replied Sendalk.

The shot down swiftly into the clearing, for as Nrok perceived the dreadful bird above him he ran swiftly with the reluctant Tua to the jungle. But the Martians' skillful control of the craft beat him to it, and they landed between him and the jungle.

Before they opened the door of the craft to emerge, Sendalk offered Thrag one of the ray ejectors the cave man had recently coveted. The troglodyte looked upon it dubiously and then clutched his stone axe and keen knife more tightly as we waved away the proffered "kill stick." His own primitive weapons were far

more dependable, thought he.

If Nrok had been stricken with terror at the descent of the terrible bird he expected to devour him at any moment he was astounded to the *nth* power by seeing Thrag emerge from it. But a few moments ago, he had seen the troglodyte bound fast to the stake in the ant hill, the tiny insects swarming over the lower part of his body. Tua also gazed in amazement at the scene which surpassed by far the most radical illusions of her wildest dreams.

Behind Thrag came the two Martians, but now Nrok was not to be surprised at anything he saw, even if twenty forest monsters should emerge from the small door of the craft.

"I have got you, Nrok!" exclaimed Thrag. "You must fight with me!"

The cowardly chief of the troglodytes backed away, and attempted to elude his chosen nemesis, but one of the Martians intercepted him, and in abject fear, Nrok turned back in the direction of Thrag to escape the weird devil whose four arms swung at him menacingly.

"Fight!" cried Thrag.

Nrok was of the opinion that he would have to, for Thrag stood between him and the comparative safety of the jungle. He aimed a vicious swing with his stone axe at Thrag's head—and missed, as the nimble troglodyte whom he

had recently consigned to the torture of the ants sprang beneath the blow and plunged his knife to the very hilt into the black heart of Nrok. Choking and gasping, the life blood welled from the dying cave man, who having fought underhanded all his life had at last fallen in fair combat.

Thrag sprang to the side of Tua who sank weeping into his arms, and tenderly he lifted his beloved mate and bore her to the safety of the space ship. She shuddered in wide-eyed alarm as they approached the two weird creatures standing beside the monster bird.

"Do not fear them," consoled Thrag. "They are our friends, and have saved us from Nrok and the Cliff Dwellers."

The inimitable Tua became less afraid after her mate's assurance, and with the kindly manner in which the Martians treated them. Tua was all surprise and alarm as they arose in the space craft far above the jungle, but her fear changed to delight as they swung away over the plain and forest, and she saw that they were not going to fall.

Thrag gained the attention of his friends from another world. He pointed to Tua and then to himself; then he pointed away to where a far off sea rested upon the horizon, lazily lapping the prehistoric shores of a world whose scientific progress was yet to be realized.

"He means that he wished to be taken there!" explained Drigab. "They will be far from the people who sought to kill him!"

"We can do better than that," replied Sendalk. "I'll transport them to the antipode of Wroaad where they may live in peace to the end of their days."

"It would be interesting to take them back to Nime with us," suggested Drigab.

"But we can't," replied Sendalk, "for several reasons: the atmosphere of Nime is too rare to keep them alive, and we would have to keep them in hermetically sealed rooms containing an atmosphere as dense as that of Wroaad. The living conditions and food would be unlike theirs, and they could not subsist upon our methods of living. Then too, even if they were able to live on Nime, we haven't enough supplies for four of us on the return journey."

"You are heading for the other side of Wroaad?" quiered Drigab.

"Yes," answered Sendalk. "I should like to see what it is like before we return to Nime. Then too, we can leave Thrag and his mate there. It will be like a new world to them."

"We shall rise above the atmosphere, then," said Drigab, his four hands on the various controls of the interplanetary flyer.

Far above the earth they soared until the curved contour of the planet was visible to the astounded Thrag and Tua. Higher and higher they cruised until starlight replaced daylight, the craft entering space where a flaming sun, a silver moon, and iridescent stars reigned eternally in the blackness of the ether void.

It is impossible to describe the emotions, thoughts and sensations of the troglodyte and his mate as they viewed the awesome wonders of the vast cosmos. With amazement they stared back at the crescent-like surface of their planet which loomed so large before their eyes.

"It will be a long time," remarked Drigab, "before these people reach a stage where they can visit our planet in space craft similar to ours."

"But it will come, affirmed Sendalk, "if in the meantime their race does not die out. It is the law of evolution. Our forebears went through a similar ascent from the lower animal life."

"By the time the peoples of this world visit us, our race of beings may be dead and gone, and our planet nearly as lifeless as Dracom."

"Or else we shall move to another world of some other solar system which is similar to Nime," added Sendalk.

The shroud of night lay heavy over the opposite side of the earth

where the two Martians finally brought the craft to rest. Here, the four spent the night within the space ship around which the prowling night life of the prehistoric world roared, coughed, sighed, screamed and moaned, their concert of sounds lulling to sleep the two troglodytes. In such strange surroundings, unaccustomed to the noises of the carnivore, Drigab and Sendalk rested but did not sleep.

With the break of dawn, the four ventured forth, Thrag and Tua to find a cave in which to live, the two Martian explorers to find out to what sort of a land they had come. The two latter found it to be similar to that which they had just left upon the other side of the planet, but to Thrag and Tua it was truly a new world, and they were not long in finding an ideal, primitive residence.

Upon a tree-covered promontory whose waving fronds threw a checkered shade about the entranceway to the cool cavern beyond, they found their home. A short distance away, a bubbling spring gurgled happily, its crystal waters dancing away with noisy abandon down the moss coverlet carpeting the slope which led to the forest beneath. The beauty of the spot impressed itself even upon the more practical minds of the Martians.

"How primitive, wild and lovely!" exclaimed Sendalk.

"We shall return, some day," promised Drigab, ignorant of the great war upon the planet Nime which had sprung into flame following their departure. At that very moment it was shaking down the bulwarks of their civilization, destroying the scientific advances of the little red planet, and reducing its remnant of survivors back into a state of savage barbarism.

They little knew that upon their return they should be thrown into a chaos of disorderly conflict which would see no more interplanetary flights for several thousand centuries to come.

But perhaps we shall hear more about that at a future time. Right now, we are more concerned with Thrag, the cave man, and his mate, Tua, for whom he so nobly and often fought, ready to lay down his life for hers if the occasion arose.

The Martians, reluctant to leave this earthly paradise, lingered with the two reunited troglodytes until the sun reached its zenith, and then they boarded their space ship for the return trip across solar space to their neighboring world.

Together, Thrag and Tua stood upon their lofty citadel and watched the ascent of the space ship. Through the transparent section of the cosmic flyer, the two Martians waved their farewell, and the cave man and his mate whom they had so nobly served responded

ed as the space craft rose higher. It gained altitude slowly, and then, increasing its speed, it shot off up into the sky, quickly dwindling to a small dot which disappeared.

"Was it all a dream?" whispered Tua, gazing into the strong features of her mate adoringly.

"No," replied Thrag, holding his savage little woman close to him, and addressing her in their primitive language, "but from now on I hope it will be a dream—such as I have always dreamed."

The End

*(Continued from page 115)*

Those unbroken lines of poles  
With their endless, stretching wires.  
Scattered o'er the broad, green land,  
Everywhere in spreading spots,  
Towering, huge, their cities stand,  
Stirring, pulsing, teeming clots.

Huge, swinging bulks,  
Great, clumsy hulks  
Move all about;  
And in and out

Among them creep the tiny creatures whom these Titan things obey.

Away on high  
Through the vast, free sky,  
Those deeps so still  
Forever thrill

With the silent things they're sending quivering on their unseen way.

All over the Earth is the work of their hands,  
And under the Sea and the Ground;  
With blossoms they've covered the desert's hot sands,  
Made day out of night profound.

They're puny and feeble, these small, swarming men,  
Mere motes in the while of their Fates;  
But they work with each other, together, and then  
All Nature their conquest awaits.

(Continued from page 5)

the burden—a staggering load of emotional impact. Fine. But at other times, as in *THE FOURTH POWER*, the conflict is all just talk, it is hard to believe in the central gadget that everyone is so excited about, the climax is confusing and unclear, and when all the surviving characters wander off to sit down and discuss what has just happened . . . at least one reader had a strong temptation to hurl the book the length of the room. Brunner is a fully involved man of firmly held principles yet only too often a literary coldness separates what he wants to say from how he says it.

Readers of this journal will be interested in *THREE STORIES BY MURRAY LEINSTER, JACK WILLIAMSON, AND JOHN WYNDHAM* with an introduction by Sam Moskowitz (Doubleday, \$3.95) which, while not being the snappiest title in the world, is certainly descriptive enough. The introduction is a typical piece of Moskowitziana in which ancient factual data and—I'm sorry Sam—ancient opinion are mixed in equal portions. Moskowitz has yet to understand that literary criticism is more than

which parts of which stories resemble other stories. The stories themselves are fine bits of nostalgia from the dawn of SF where—as in the Leinster story—inventors are always German and say “. . . you *verdammt* fool, what is der idea?” We no longer have the temperament or the leisure to develop a simple mechanical idea in all its extrapolative glory as is done here, and who is to say the change is for the better or the worse?

As a brief report, let me urge you to buy *THE EINSTEIN INTERSECTION* by Samuel R. Delany (Ace Books, 40¢). Mr. Delany is one of the newest and youngest writers—and I'm sure he is damned tired of hearing that by now—but it is to his credit. His characters breathe youth and energy and he himself is making impressive inroads on the very form of the science fiction novel. This book jazzes, irritates and captivates, but is never dull, and at times we are even permitted to watch the writer while he is writing it. I wish the author well: if he is starting out this way in the years to come he may scale walls that we never knew were there.

### **Don't Miss**

JACK VANCE'S GREAT NEW NOVELET "THE NARROW LAND"

**IN THE JULY FANTASTIC**

(Continued from page 47)

have a word with that blundering Earthman."

"Look!" Lord Oufia pointed. "There: he lands in his sky-car. Let us hear what excuses he offers. If they are unsatisfactory, I suggest that we kill him outright; he impresses me unfavorably."

They watched Hack approach, eyes narrow, hands resting on the hilts of their swords.

Drecke pointed to the destroyed city of the Sabols. "The project is a fiasco! After so much time and money, the population has escaped!"

"Such seems to be the case," said Hack. "Well, at least we have removed an outrage to civilized sensibilities from the landscape."

"Ridiculous!" thundered Oufia. "We are not impressed by such pettifoggery. The city means nothing; it was little worse than Grangali."

"In this connection I am in a position to bring you some news," said Hack. "The Sabol ruling clique, with motivations apparently similar to your own, required their control organization to tunnel under Grangali, and blow it out of existence, exactly as we just now destroyed Peraz. Did you by any chance hear the explosions?"

"Explosions! You mean that Grangali is. . ."

"The site is marked now by a shallow crater."

The phrone nobles raised their

arms in the air, turned contorted faces toward Sabo, and rived each other in execrations.

"How many escaped?" groaned Lord Drecke at last. "Do any of our folk remain?"

"Yes," said Hack. "The explosions were planned and executed so as to warn the entire population, to allow everyone time to evacuate his unhealthy substandard hovel. In this respect the demolition of the city is an unmitigated cataclysm. enormous number of obstructions were formed during mining operation, from which Zodiac Corporation can build a model community, perhaps close to where we now stand."

"But what of our memorials, our fetishes, our regalia? Is it gone—all gone?"

"All gone," said Hack. "However—if I may interpose an outsider's point of view—it was largely obsolete. In the new city, which Zodiac Control will help you build, these would be considered little more than barbaric survivals, mementoes of a rather grotesque period in your development."

Drecke heaved a great sigh. "You are very cheerful, but it was not your city which was blown up. Who is to pay for this new city you speak of? Zodiac Control?"

"Why not the Sabols?" suggested Hack. "After all, they destroyed the old one!"



For once the lords could not be aroused. Drecke gave his head a rueful shake. "This is grasping after one of the moons: totally realistic."

"Not altogether," said Hack. "If we drove a tunnel through Sabol territory, where my technicians discovered high grade mineral deposits. In due course these should yield a great deal of money."

"But they are on Sabol territory!"

Hack nodded. "This fact suggests a means to trick the Sabols, to force them to pay for the rebuilding of Grangali."

"How is this?" demanded Lord Oufia.

"I will place myself in communication with Sabol authorities," said Hack. "I will point out that with both cities devastated, the time is ripe to forget old animosities, to join together and pool all resources, to jointly reconstruct Grangali and Peraz, or even better, a single commercial and administrative center. We will thereupon announce the discovery of the ore deposits on Sabol territory, and thus finance the new construction."

The faces of the lords reflected mixed emotions. Drecke said grudgingly, "It is a sly scheme, and I must say offers some practical advantages. Is it feasible?"

"We won't know till we try," said Hack. "All I require is your

assurance that you will put aside the old rivalry and form the association I mentioned."

The lords screwed up their faces in disgust. "Left-handers, everyone!"

Hack said, "It is a means by which to plunder the Sabols, in essence."

Lord Drecke said reluctantly, "Under the circumstances I suppose we have no great choice . . . . It is either this or penury . . . . One or two matters puzzle me. It seems strange that the explosions should occur so closely—almost at the same time."

"Not so strange," said Hack. "When Zodiac Control acquired the Argus contract, I was put in charge of both projects, and naturally tended to make similar recommendations to similar problems." Hack started back toward the Merlin, leaving the Phrones staring after him. Hack called back, "I suggest then that you return to the neighborhood of Grangali and wait there till you hear from me. If I can sell the Sabols on this idea, things will be happening—fast."

"I can understand your indignation," Hack told the Sabol Grandees whom he had intercepted en route back to Peraz, just as they had glimpsed the small irregular bay which once had been the site of their city. "The Phrones are unquestionably

a depraved people of unspeakable duplicity. I believe I have arrived at a scheme to pay them back in their own coin."

"How is that?" demanded Duke Gassman. "We have already destroyed Grangali; how can we do more?"

Hack worked his face into the sly leer which was fast becoming a habitual and chronic grimace. "When we drove the tunnel under Phrone territory, I noticed many valuable ore deposits. Here is how to victimize the Phrones. Request a merger, an amalgamation of your two countries, to form a single political entity—managed naturally by Zodiac. Then when wealth pours from the Phrone mines, half the money must be used to Sabol profit. Essentially the Phrones will build you a new, modern and sanitary city to replace Peraz!"

"Ha, ha!" croaked Duke Bodo. "There is justice, at any rate! But will the Phrones agree to such a plan?"

Hack shrugged. "There is no harm in making the proposal. I will do so at once."

## Chapter IX

A week later Hack crowded Drecke, Oufia, Gassman and Bodo into the Merlin, and swinging the power dial far over, sent the air-car lurching west. Over Opal Mountain they flew, where

the nobles, pointing here and there, reminisced over old campaigns. Presently they crossed the swath in the forest which marked the Parnassian border. Hack took the Merlin down at a long slant, and landed on a meadow near the palace—Dibden.

A maiden in a gauzy white gown came forth to inquire their purpose in landing, and Hack requested an audience with Cyril Dibden. The maiden bowed with a graceful spreading-out of her hands and led the group into a cool garden, where other maidens served fragrant cakes and a soft sweet wine. The nobles of Phronus and Sabo, Hack noted, after grunts of disgust for 'effete delicacy' and 'moony estheticism', enjoyed the comfort of the chairs, the cakes and wine no less than the attendance of the beautiful maidens. Hack nudged Drecke. "This is how we will do it in the new city!"

Drecke hawked, cleared his nose and throat. "Sometimes old ways are better." He spat under the table. "Sometimes not."

Cyril Dibden appeared, smiling with pained disapproval at the sight of his guests. "To what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

Hack introduced his associates. "You will be interested to know that Phronus and Sabo are no longer separate states. The ruling cliques, in order to pursue a more

effective foreign policy, have formed a political union."

"Well, well, well!" exclaimed Cyril Dibden. "Congratulations and well wishes are certainly in order!" He called for more wine.

"We have come to study your methods," said Hack. "We hope to do something similar when we rebuild."

"I suppose I should be flattered," said Dibden.

"During the next year you'll see a great deal of us all," Hack went on. "My clients have been bad neighbors and want to make amends."

"Hmm, indeed. . . Very nice, of course. Still, we live in a quiet life at Parnassus, and receive few visitors. . . ."

An hour passed. The nobles became jovial. Drecke tried to capture one of the maidens, in spite of Dibden's alarm. When the maiden had escaped and the four nobles were once more seated, Hack took Dibden for a solitary walk along the banks of the little pond which graced the garden.

Dibden immediately poured forth his resentment for what he considered Hack's discourtesy. "At great expense I built a border control to isolate myself from these cutthroats. Now you fly them over the boundary and bring them into my palace with not so much as a by-your-leave!"

"Not so loud," warned Hack. "They're on their good be-

haviour; don't antagonize them. They'll tunnel under the border with their new mining equipment and break up into your very bedroom."

Dibden gave Hack a sharp look. "Quite frankly, I don't understand and I don't like your attitude. It appears to me that you are attempting intimidation."

"No more than you deserve," said Hack, perhaps a trifle primly. "You inveigled the Phrones and Sabols—separately of course—into soliciting management contracts, going so far as to write the contracts for them—" Hack held up his hand as Dibden sputtered an angry protest. "You convinced them the management corporations would provide weapons, so that they could more expeditiously destroy each other."

"Ridiculous," snorted Dibden.

"Your motives? I assume that you want to extend Parnassus to the sea. I assume that you resent the necessity of guarding your border."

"Assume as well that I resent the very existence of these animals! These callous murderers, these gross and odorous lack-wits!"

"They are Zodiac clients," said Hack, "and they would never tunnel under the border of another Zodiac client."

Cyril Dibden swung about. "Do you hint, do you suggest, that I

award your company a contract to manage Parnassus?"

"I do."

"This is pure extortion."

Hack shrugged. "When you run with the wolves, you shouldn't complain of sore feet. You plotted to victimize me with the Sabol contract, which was hardly philanthropy. On the other hand a Zodiac contract can be of benefit to you. We will save you money, discourage marauding and tunneling and in general relieve you of drudgery."

In a strangled voice Dibden started to blurt out a rejection of Hack's proposal. He stopped short, tugged at his beard, then walked rapidly back and forth, head down, hands behind his back. He halted in front of Hack. "Very well. I'll give it a try. Perhaps it might even work out for the best. I will insist on a stringent contract, with absolutely select personnel. . . ."

"Well done, Hack," said Edgar Zarius in measured tones. "The arrangements are just about what I originally had in mind. I couldn't have done better myself. Good work!"

Hack started to speak, but Lusiane made a quick fluttering gesture. "Oh come now, Edgar, don't go all maudlin. Hack is paid to do his job. If he didn't, we'd fire him."

"I suppose that's true," said Edgar with a small twitch of a

smile. "After all, Hack, I did have to jack you up a bit, eh?"

Hack seemed at a loss for a reply. Lusiane rose to her feet, turned an ineffable glance down at Hack, swung her cape over her shoulders. "I have an engagement and I must be on my way. I suppose I can fly you ashore, Hack, if you are finished with Edgar."

Edgar looked up sharply. "I had been planning to talk over Hack's new assignment. A very peculiar situation has arisen."

Hack interrupted him. "If it's all the same with both of you, I'll just wander off by myself."

"Just as you like," said Edgar. "Please call the office tomorrow."

Edgar shook his head soberly. "I'm afraid that there's something about you, Hack, that rubs Miss Ludlow the wrong way."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Hack.

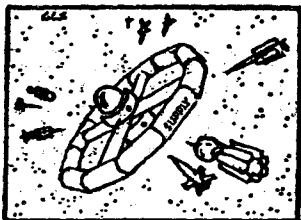
"You'll probably be well advised to keep out of her way as much as possible. She's a capricious young woman and—well, there's no point in causing her vexation or whatever it is you do."

"Naturally not," said Hack. "You're quite right. . . . Good afternoon, Mr. Zarius."

"Good afternoon, Hack."

The End

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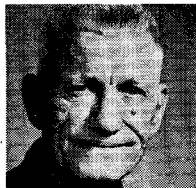
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